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Vol. 4 No. 1

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# Romances

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DIANA PALMER,  
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BESTSELLING AUTHORS!

and Lace  
Moves  
Sunsets  
Sheep

DIANA PALMER  
ARLENE JAMES  
REBECCA FLANDERS  
SUSAN FOX



### DIANA PALMER

In 1993, Diana Palmer celebrated the publication of her fiftieth novel for Silhouette Books. Diana Palmer's first romance novel for Silhouette Books was published in 1982. In California's *Affaire de Coeur*, she was listed as one of the top ten romance authors in the country. She is the winner of five national Waldenbooks Romance Bestseller Awards and two national B. Dalton Books Bestseller Awards.

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Arlene James grew up in Oklahoma and has lived all over the South. In 1976, she married "the most romantic man in the world." The author enjoys traveling with her husband, but writing has always been her chief pastime.



### REBECCA FLANDERS

A native of Georgia, Rebecca Flanders began her writing career at the age of nine. She completed her first novel by the time she was nineteen and sold her first book in 1979. Rebecca enjoys painting in oils and watercolors, as well as listening to and composing music.

### SUSAN FOX

Susan Fox is an American writer living in Des Moines, Iowa, where she was born. Her enjoyment in reading romances led to writing them and reflects an early interest in Westerns and cowboys.

HARLEQUIN®  
WORLD'S BEST  
*Romances*

From the desk of Candy Lee,  
Managing Editor

Dear Reader,

A blanket, a picnic basket filled with a chilled bottle and hors d'oeuvres, and a perfect sunset out on the range are the ingredients for a romantic Western rendezvous--so I've planned my own secret meeting to lasso my heart's desire.

Although right now, as I sit relaxing in the midday sun, sipping a thirst-quenching drink, all I can think about is being swept away as...an embittered woman tries again with a man she believes has a heart of stone... a ruggedly handsome stranger causes sparks to fly out on the range...a woman does anything she can to get what she wants and falls head over heels in the process... and two hearts are drawn together, a little older and wiser--but will the past get in their way?

Stretch out and relax with this month's special Western volume of the World's Best Romances, and join me in creating the perfect getaway this summer!

Best wishes,

*Candy Lee*

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WORLD'S BEST

# Romances

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**DIANA  
PALMER**  
**Rawhide and Lace**



Erin was convinced her life was over.  
Ty Wade, a man as tough as rawhide and as  
unyielding as stone, was the one to convince  
her that she could have everything she wanted  
in life again....



The hospital emergency room was full of people, but the tall man never saw the crying children and listless adults who covered the waiting area. His face cold and hard, and very nearly homely. Tyson Wade paced the small corridor restlessly, his shepherd's coat making him look even taller than he was, the creamy softness of his Stetson a direct contrast to a face that looked like leather and sharp rock. Bruce had to be all right. Ty had waited too long to make peace with the younger brother he hardly knew.

A green-uniformed man walked into the waiting area, removing his mask and cap as he walked toward the taller man. Then he turned, drawing Ty into a small unoccupied examination room.

"I'm sorry," the doctor said then, gently. "There was too much internal damage. We lost him."

Ty didn't flinch. He'd had years of practice at hiding pain, at keeping his deeper feelings under control.

"Your brother was driving a small sports car, a convertible. When it rolled, he didn't have a chance." The doctor paused long enough to produce Bruce's personal effects. "I'm sorry we couldn't save him," he repeated softly, sincerely.

Ty nodded, lost in bitter memories and regret.

It was misting rain outside when he left the hospital, cold for Texas in November, but he hardly felt it. It seemed so unreal to think of Bruce as dead. He'd been six years younger than Ty,

more adventurous, more petted. Bruce had been spoiled with easy living and an abundance of attention from their mother. Ty had been raised by their rancher father, a cold, practical, no-nonsense man who looked upon women as a weakness and brought Ty up to feel the same way. Ironically, it was Erin who'd finally separated Bruce from Ty and the ranch.

Erin. His eyes closed briefly as he pictured her, laughing, her hair long and black and straight, her elfin face bright with joy, her green eyes twinkling. He groaned.

There was nothing in his face that a woman would find attractive, and he knew it. Perhaps that was why he'd attacked Erin on sight, he reflected. She'd been a model when Bruce met her in nearby San Antonio and brought her home for weekend visits, a prize he'd brought home to big brother, to fling in his arrogant face.

How long ago it all seemed! But all of it had taken place in just a year's time. He'd antagonized Erin from the start, picking at her, deliberately making her as uncomfortable as possible. She'd taken that smoldering dislike at face value until one dark, cold night when Bruce had been called out on urgent business. Erin and Ty had been alone in the house, and he'd antagonized her one time too many.

He vividly remembered the look in her green eyes when, after she'd slapped him, he'd jerked her into his hard arms and kissed the breath out of

her. Her lips had been soft and slightly swollen, her eyes wide and soft and dazed. And to his astonishment, instead of slapping him again, she'd reached up to him, her body clinging like ivy to the strength of his.

It had been like a dream sequence. Her mouth, dark, soft wine under his hard lips; her body, welcoming. Soft cushions on the floor in front of the fireplace, her hushed, ragged breathing as he'd bared her breasts and touched them; her shocked cry as he'd touched her intimately. She hadn't stopped him; she hadn't even tried.

He ground his teeth together. He hadn't known, hadn't guessed, that she was a virgin. He'd tried to stop, so shocked that he wasn't even thinking... but she'd held him. No, she'd whispered, it was too late to stop now. He'd been so careful then, so careful not to hurt her any more than he already had. But he'd given her no pleasure. And before he could try again, could even begin to show her any real tenderness, they'd heard Bruce's car coming up the long driveway. Then, with reality, had come all the doubts, all the hidden fears. And he'd laughed, taunting her with her easy surrender. Get out, he'd said coldly, or Bruce was going to get an earful. He'd watched her dragging her clothing around her, white faced, shaking. He'd watched her leave the room with tears streaming from her eyes. He'd had too much pride to back down, to apologize.

Bruce had hated him for that. He'd guessed what had happened, and he'd followed Erin to wring the truth from her. A day later he'd moved out, to live with a friend in San Antonio. But Bruce had gotten even, just before he'd

left the house for good. He'd told Ty that Erin had hated what Ty had done to her, that his "fumbling attempts at lovemaking" had sickened her. Then he'd walked out triumphantly, leaving Ty so sick and humiliated that he'd finished off a bottle of tequila and spent two days in a stupor.

Erin had come back to the ranch two months later. She'd driven up in a little sports car, much like the one Bruce would die in almost six months later....

"I HAVE TO TALK to you," she said in her soft, clear voice. Her eyes were soft, too; full of secrets.

"What do we have to talk about?" Ty replied, his own tone uncompromising, careless. Against his will, he was drawn to her as she poised there in a green mint dress that clung lovingly to every soft line of her high-breasted body, the wind whipping her long black hair around her like a shawl.

Her face paled, her eyes lost their softness. "But you've got to listen to me! That night..."

"What about it?" he demanded, his voice faintly bored. "I'd planned to seduce you and then tell Bruce, but you left without forcing my hand." His eyes narrowed. "You were just a one-night stand, honey. And one night was enough."

That brought her to tears. She whispered in anguish, "I must have been a terrible disappointment."

"I'll amen that," he told her. "Why did you come down here, anyway? Bruce doesn't come here anymore, and don't pretend you don't know it."

"I'm not looking for Bruce," she burst out. "Oh, Ty, I haven't seen him since I left here! It's you I came to see.

"There's something I've got to tell you...!"

"I've got livestock to look after," he said indifferently, dismissing her. "Get out of here. Go model a gown or something."

Her eyes grew dull then; something died in them. She looked at him for a long, quiet moment, almost said something else; then, as if defeated, turned away.

"Just a minute," he called after her.

She'd turned, an expression of hope on her face. "Yes?"

He smiled down at her mockingly, forcing himself not to weaken, not to let her get the best of him. "If you came to see me because you wanted another roll in the hay, I'll let the cattle wait for a few minutes," he offered. "Maybe you've improved since the last time."

Her eyes closed, her face contorted as if in pain. "How could you, Tyson?" she whispered, then opened her eyes to reveal an anguish so profound that Ty was forced to look away. But the agony in her voice pierced his soul. "How could you? Oh, God, you don't know how much I...!"

His feet started to move. But suddenly, she whirled and ran to her car, gunned it to life and raced frantically down the long drive, sending the small convertible sliding on the gravel as she shot it out onto the paved road. He watched the car until it was out of sight, feeling empty and cold and lonely....

\*

BRUCE'S ROOMMATE had given Ty a whole box of letters Erin had sent back to Bruce last week. There were dozens, all from Bruce, all addressed to

Erin. All unopened. And there was one letter, from her, to Bruce. It was very recent. And opened.

"He went crazy when he read that last one," Sam had told him. "Just hog-wild. Raged about you, Mr. Wade," he'd added, apologetically. "He changed his will, made all kinds of threats...."

Ty now stared at the letters in his hand, feeling sick all over. He was sitting in his pine-paneled den at Stag-horn with a half-empty bottle of whiskey in one hand and a much-used glass in the other. His eyes were cold and bitter, and he was numb with the pain of discovery.

The letters Bruce had written to Erin were full of unrequited love, brimming with passion and proposals of marriage. And in every one was at least one sentence about Ty and how much he hated him.

Those were bad enough. But the letter Erin had sent to Bruce tore at his heart.

"Dearest Bruce," she'd written in a fine, delicate, hand, "I am returning all your letters, in hopes that they will make you realize that I can't give you what you want from me. You're a fine man, and any woman would be lucky to marry you. But I can't love you, Bruce. I never have, and I never can." His heart froze as he read on: "I can't forget or forgive what's happened to me. I've been through two surgeries now, one to put a steel rod in my crushed pelvis, the other to remove it. I walk with a cane, and I'm scarred. Perhaps the emotional scars are even worse, since I lost the baby in the wreck, too...."

The baby! Ty's eyes closed and his body shook with anguish. She'd left



Staghorn hell-bent for leather, and she'd wrecked the car. He hurt as he'd never hurt in his life.

And now he knew why she'd come to see him. She'd been carrying his child. She was going to tell him. But he hadn't let her. He'd humiliated her into leaving. And because of him, she'd lost everything.

He remembered now, too late, the hopeful look in her eyes, the softness of her expression when she'd said, "I have something to tell you...."

His hand opened, letting the letter drop to the floor. "Erin," he whispered brokenly. "Oh, God, Erin, forgive me!"

HE WENT INTO town after the funeral to see Ed Johnson, the family's attorney. With the strain between himself and his brother, Ty expected that Bruce had tried to keep him from inheriting his share of Staghorn—an assumption that proved to be all too true.

"Bruce has changed his will three times in the past year," Ed began. "Once, he tried to borrow money on the estate for some get-rich-quick scheme. He was so changeable. And after last week, I feared for his sanity."

Last week. Just after he'd received Erin's letter. Ty closed his eyes and sighed. "He cut me out of his will, obviously," he said matter-of-factly.

"Got it in one," Ed replied. "He left everything he had to a woman with a New York address. I think it's that model he was dating a few months back," he mumbled, missing Ty's shocked expression. "Yes, here it is. Miss Erin Scott. His entire holdings. With the provision," he added, lifting his eyes to Ty's white face, "that she

come and live on the ranch. If she doesn't meet that condition, every penny of his holdings goes to Ward Jessup."

Ward Jessup! Ty's breath caught in his throat. He and Ward Jessup were long-standing enemies. Jessup's ranch, which adjoined Staghorn, was littered with oil rigs, and the man made no secret of the fact that he wanted to extend his oil search to the portion of Staghorn closest to his land. Jessup had made several attempts to persuade Bruce to sell his half to him. What a priceless piece of revenge, Ty thought absently. Because Bruce knew how much Erin hated Ty—that she'd rather die than share a roof with Tyson Wade—he'd made sure big brother would never inherit.

"That's the end of it, I guess," Ty said gently.

"I don't understand." Ed stared at him over his glasses.

"Bruce had a letter from her last week," the younger man said, his voice level, quiet. "She was in a wreck some time ago. She's been crippled, and she lost the child she was carrying. It was mine."

Ed cleared his throat. "Oh. I'm sorry."

"Not half as sorry as I am," he said, and got up. "Thanks for your time, Ed."

"Wait a minute," the attorney said. "You aren't just giving up half your ranch, for God's sake? Not after you've worked most of your life to build it into what it is?"

Ty stared at him. "Erin hates me. She has more reason than Bruce to want revenge. And I don't have much heart for a fight, not even to save Staghorn." He jammed his Stetson

down over his black hair, his eyes lifeless. "If she wants to cut my throat, I'm going to let her. My God, that's the least I owe her!"

Ed watched him leave, frowning. That didn't sound like the Tyson Wade he knew. Something had changed him, perhaps losing his brother. The old Ty would have fought with his last breath to save the homestead. Ed shook his head and picked up the phone.

"Jennie, get me Erin Scott in New York," he told his secretary.

\*

SHE WAS sitting on a sofa in a ground-floor apartment in Queens. Why had she agreed to go? she wondered miserably. Her leg was giving her hell. She had no future to look forward to, nothing to live for. Nothing except revenge. And even that left a bad taste in her mouth.

But she couldn't see all those people who worked on the ranch out of work, she thought. Not in winter, which November practically was. She couldn't stand by and leave them homeless and jobless because of her if she let Ward Jessup take over half of Staghorn.

She was packed and waiting for whomever Tyson sent to get her. In her right hand was a heavy cane, dangling beside the leg that still refused to support her.

At two o'clock precisely, there came a knock on the door. "Come in," she called from the sofa.

She got the shock of her life when the door opened to admit Tyson Wade himself.

He stopped dead in the doorway and stared at her as she got unsteadily to her feet, leaning heavily on the cane. The impact of his handiwork was

damning. He remembered a laughing young girl. Now she was pitifully thin, and her face was pale and drawn. He looked around him with obvious distaste, his silver eyes reflecting his feelings about her shabby surroundings.

"I haven't been able to work for several months," she informed him. "I've been drawing a disability pension and eating thanks to food stamps."

His eyes closed briefly; when they opened, they were vaguely haunted. "You won't have to live on food stamps now," he said, his voice rough.

"Obviously not, according to your family attorney." She smiled faintly.

He watched her come toward him, every movement careful and obviously painful.

IT WAS ALL Ty could do to keep silent as he and Erin rode to the airport. There were so many things he wanted to say to her, to explain, to discuss. He wanted to apologize, but that was impossible for him. He'd never learned to bend. His father had taught him that a man never could, and still call himself a man.

"Nothing bothers you, does it?" she asked carelessly.

"Don't you believe it," he replied. He glanced at her, his eyes steady and curious as he waited at a traffic light.

She turned the cane in her hands, feeling its coolness. Ty seemed different somehow. Less arrogant, less callous. Perhaps his brother's death had caused that change, although he and Bruce had never been close.

He watched her toying with the cane as he pulled back into the flow of traffic. "How long will you have to use that thing?"

"I don't know." If she didn't do the exercises religiously, she'd be using it for the rest of her life. But what did that matter now? She could never go back to modeling. And nothing else seemed to be worth the effort.

She eyed him warily. "Mr. Johnson told you about the wreck, I suppose?"

"I read your last letter to Bruce," he said in a voice that was deep and quiet... and frankly haunted.

Her spirit broke at his tone. A tortured sob burst from her throat. She tried to stifle it but couldn't.

His eyes lifted, holding hers. "I wish I could tell you how I felt when I knew," he said hesitantly. "The things I said to you that day..."

He started to reach toward her, and she backed away until the car door stopped her.

"Don't you touch me," she said in a high, strangled voice. "Don't you ever touch me again. If you do, I'll walk out the door, and you and your outfit can all go to hell!"

It was the first time he'd ever reached out toward her, and her rejection hurt. But he struggled against familiar feelings of wounded pride, struggled to understand things from her side.

"Okay," he said, his voice steady, almost tender. "Want something to eat before we get on the plane?"

She shifted restlessly, staring at him, eyes huge in her thin face. "I...didn't have lunch," she faltered.

"We'll get a sandwich, then." He got out and went around to open her door. But he didn't offer to help her. He watched her put the cane down and lean on it heavily. "Therapy is the only

way you'll ever walk without a cane. Did they tell you that?"

"You've got a lot of nerve...!" She glared up at him.

"I busted my hip on the rodeo circuit," he told her flatly. "I remember the exercises to this day, and how they're done. So I'll help you get into the routine."

"I'll help you into the hospital if you try it," she threatened.

"Spunky," he approved, nodding. He even smiled a little. "You always were. I liked that about you."

"You liked nothing about me," she reminded him.

"Are you sure?" he asked, watching her curiously. "I thought women had instincts about men and their reactions."

"As you found out the hard way, I knew very little about men. Then."

He didn't look away. "And as you found out, the hard way, I knew very little about women."

She flinched, just a little, then searched that gray fog in his eyes, wondering what he meant. "Pull the other one," she said finally. "You've probably forgotten more about women than I'll ever know. Bruce said you had."

His jaw tensed. "Bruce said one hell of a lot, didn't he? I heard what you thought of my 'fumbling,' too."

She stiffened and froze. "What?"

"He said you thought I was a clumsy, fumbling fool. That you described it all to him, and laughed together about it..."

Her lips parted, and her face went stark white. "He told you... he said that... to you?" She shook her head. "He couldn't have!" There were tears in her eyes. She'd never said any such

thing to Bruce. She looked up into watchful gray eyes and tried to speak. Her eyes wandered over his homely face, seeing the new lines, the angles and craggy roughness, the strength.

"You won't find beauty even if you look hard," he said in a tone that was almost but not quite amused.

"You were so different from Bruce," she whispered. "Remote and alone and invulnerable."

"Except for one long night," he agreed, watching the color return to her cheeks. "Will you at least believe that I regret what I did to you? I'm sorry... about the baby we made," he said hesitantly, his voice husky with emotion.

She looked up at him, startled by his tone. She saw something there, something elusive. "You would have wanted it," she said with sudden insight.

He nodded. "If I'd known, I'd never have let you go."

She looked away. Guilt, she thought. He was capable of that, at least. But guilt was one thing she didn't want from him. Or pity.

"I'm so tired," she whispered wearily. "So tired."

He could see that. Thinking about all she'd been through made him feel curiously protective. He touched her hair in a hesitant gesture. "You'll be all right," he said quietly. "I'll take care of you. I'll take care of everything now."

\*

THE STAGHORN ranch was just as Erin remembered it—big and sprawling and like a small town unto itself. The house was a creamy yellow Spanish stucco with a red roof, graceful arches and cacti landscaping all around it.

The household staff was the same. Conchita and her husband, José, were still looking after the *señor*, keeping everything in order.

The house had two stories, but it was on the ground floor that Erin's room was located. Only two doors away from Ty's. That was vaguely disquieting, but Erin was sure that he'd only put her on the ground floor because of her hip.

She sat down gingerly in a wing chair by the lacy curtains of the window and closed her eyes with a sigh.

He perched himself on the spotless white coverlet of the bed and stared at her.

"You're not well," he said at last.

"You try going through two major surgeries in six months and see how well you are," she returned without opening her eyes.

"I want you to see my family doctor. Let him prescribe some exercises for that hip."

Her eyes opened, accusing. "Now look here. It's my hip, and my life, and I'll decide—"

"Not while you're on Staghorn, you won't."

ERIN HAD VOWED that she wouldn't go to the doctor, but Ty simply put her in the car and drove her there. To make matters worse, he raised eyebrows in the crowded waiting room by insisting on going in with her to talk to the doctor.

Dr. Brodie looked at the stitches, had an X ray made, and pronounced her well on the way to recovery. He prescribed some additional pain pills, in case she needed them, and gave her a preprinted sheet of exercises with special ones circled.

She stared at them all the way back to Staghorn, dreading the ordeal they represented.

"I don't want to start this," she muttered. "All that pain and cramping, and for what? I'll always limp!"

"You want to walk," he returned impassively. "But you have to be willing to do the work. I'll help, but I can't do it for you."

"Why should you want to help?" she asked, turning in the seat to fix him with a cold, level stare. He didn't look at her.

"Because I did that to you."

She stared at him uncomprehendingly. "Surely you don't think that you caused me to have the wreck?"

"Didn't I?" He laughed mirthlessly. "You were half hysterical when you left here."

"Yes, I was. And I pulled off the road and got myself together before I ever left the ranch!" she told him. "By the time the wreck happened, I was levelheaded. Even the state patrol said it was unavoidable. So if you're on some guilt trip, let me reassure you," she continued quietly. "The only thing you did was try to save your brother from me. And you succeeded."

"Beyond my wildest dreams," he said coldly. "I ruined both your lives."

"What could you have done that would have changed anything?" she asked calmly. "I would never have married Bruce. I didn't love him, and he knew it."

He glanced at her. "Maybe if I hadn't made a dead set at you, he'd have had a chance."

She shook her head firmly. "Not that way."

His eyes held hers for an instant before they returned to the road. "Didn't you ever want him?"

"Not physically, but he was good fun, a nice, undemanding companion." She leaned her head against the seat.

He turned onto the long ranch road that led back to Staghorn, down a driveway that boasted rough-wood fence posts, electrified fencing and mesquite groves everywhere among bare, leafless trees. "I thought you'd been to bed with half a dozen men. I got the shock of my life that night."

She felt her face growing warm. They shared such intimate memories, for two old enemies.

"Erin, why did you give in to me?" he asked unexpectedly. "Were you really so trusting that you didn't realize what I had in mind?"

"I was too far gone to care," she said quietly, avoiding his suddenly piercing gaze. "By the time I was fully aware of what I was doing, it was much too late to say no."

"I would have stopped if you'd asked me, all the same," he said, jerking the wheel as he pulled up at the front steps and turned to her. "I wasn't that far gone until the last few seconds."

Her face went beet red as she remembered those last few seconds with shocking clarity.

"You pulled me down to you," he said in a tone that was husky and deep, and unfamiliar. "I knew that your body was rejecting me, and why, and I was just starting to pull back. You reached up to my hips and dug those long, exquisite nails into me, and I was lost."



Her breath caught in her throat. She tried to reply and failed.

"I didn't even give you pleasure," he continued roughly. "I took you, used you, and you should have hated me for it. But you didn't. Your eyes were like velvet—so soft that I got lost in them. And I wanted to do it again, to try and make it right. But I started thinking about Bruce...and I was afraid to trust you. So I fed you a lot of bull about ruining you with Bruce and ran you off."

Her eyes widened, darkened. "You...really wanted me, didn't you?" she asked gently.

"Until you were an obsession," he replied, his voice low and slightly harsh. "You were so beautiful, Erin."

She averted her eyes. "Those days are over now," she said dully. "I'm not the same person."

"Aren't you? You could be, if you wanted to."

"With my scars?" Her voice broke, and she jerked away from him, wounded. "I'm crippled and hurt, and you feel sorry for me. That's the only reason you're even tolerating me, Ty! You were my enemy from the first day we met. Even then, you looked at me as if you hated me!"

Of course he had. He'd wanted her. Needed her. It had all been a defense against being hurt himself. He knew in his heart that she'd never want someone like him. But he couldn't tell her that. He couldn't let her know how vulnerable he'd been.

"So you're crippled," he said easily, brutally. "And apparently you like being that way, and feeling sorry for yourself, because you're not making any effort to change it. I guess you want to live under my roof and de-

pend on me for every crumb you eat for the rest of your life, is that right?"

It was a calculated risk—it might send her into spasms of weeping, for which he'd hate himself. But he was betting it would have the opposite effect.

It did. Her eyes began to blaze. Her face went white with pent-up fury. She swung at him immediately, and he caught her wrist, pulling her across the wide seat and into his hard arms.

"Stop it," she muttered, spitting out a strand of hair that had worked its way between her lips. "Oh, I do hate you, Tyson Radley Wade!"

His pale eyes kindled. "When I touched you for the first time, you moaned my name, and the blood rushed into my head like fire."

"I didn't...moan it," she whispered. His mouth was almost against hers, and she stared at its hard, thin curve as if hypnotized. She didn't want him to kiss her. It was too soon; there had been too much pain....

But he was already doing it. His mouth caught hers roughly and took it, possessed it.

It had been months, and the feel of him was making her weak. She reached up without thinking, curving her slender fingers against his cheek, and pulled him closer.

He nuzzled his cheek against hers, and his hand gently covered her breast, tracing its contours as if he'd never touched a woman like that before.

He fumbled with the buttons of her blouse, and he muttered something under his breath as he found her bra and couldn't figure out how to get it open. Finally, he settled for sliding his hand underneath, lifting her free of the lacy cup.

"Ty..." Her voice sounded oddly high-pitched.

His skin was dark against hers, dark against the telltale paleness of flesh shielded from the harsh light of the sun. And the sight of his hand there, possessing her, made her flush feverishly.

He caught her eyes. "Have you had anyone since me?" he whispered huskily.

"No," she replied honestly.

"I haven't had anyone since you." His eyes traveled down to the softness in his hand. "Oh, God, Erin, you're so beautiful."

Her lips parted on a rush of exhaled breath. What was she letting him do? Where was her pride? He hadn't caused the wreck, but if he'd listened to her, it might have been prevented. She'd lost her baby, she was crippled....

She pulled away from him, crumpling her blouse together as she avoided his eyes. She was breathing hard, but so was he.

"I guess I shouldn't have done that," he said hesitantly.

"I shouldn't have let you."

When she got out of the car, she was so flustered that she walked firmly on her damaged side for the first time since the surgery.

THE FIRST exercise session was more painful than she'd anticipated. She did the exercises described on the sheet, with Ty looming over her, demanding more than she thought she was capable of.

"You can push harder than that, for God's sake," he said, when she slackened.

"I'm not a man!"

He looked pointedly at her firm, full breasts under the revealing fabric of her body leotard, and a faint smile touched his mouth. "I'll drink to that."

"Stop looking at me there," she told him haughtily.

"Wear a bra next time," he countered as she stretched on the carpet. "I can't help it if I get disturbed by hard nipples."

She gasped, flushed, and sat up in one sharp movement. "Tyson!" she burst out.

His eyebrows arched. "Why the red rose blush, honey?" he asked innocently. "Or don't you remember that you had sex with me on this very carpet?"

"Oh, I hate you!" she cried, eyes flaring.

"No you don't, you just hate sex," he replied. "And that's my fault. But one of these days, I may change your mind about that."

"Hold your breath," she challenged.

"Daring me, Erin?" he asked, and his smile held shades of meaning as his silver eyes glittered over her body.

Watching those eyes, she began to tingle from head to toe. She felt reckless. She wanted to wipe that arrogant smile off his face. She wanted to make him vulnerable.

She arched her back, just enough to make the hard tips of her breasts blatantly visible. "Maybe I am," she whispered huskily. "So what are you going to do about it, cattle king?"

With a movement so fast it blurred, he slid down over her body and pinned her there.

"Is this what you had in mind?" Looking down, he blatantly slid one

lean hand directly over a full breast, cupping it.

She felt her breath catch. Watching him earlier—and now—a lot of things were becoming clear to her. The way he'd been in the car, hungry but not practised; the way he was cupping her now, without any preliminaries: she had a deep hunch that he knew less about women than he was pretending to. Male pride obviously ran deep. Well, two could play at this game. She didn't know a lot, either, but she'd heard women talk. . . .

"Not like that," she whispered, lifting his hand. "Like . . . this."

She showed him how to trace the softness, to tease the tip until her body stiffened and trembled with the need to be touched.

"You like it that way?" he asked under his breath, searching her eyes.

"Yes," she whispered shakily. "It arouses me."

His breath shuddered out of him. He could hardly believe it, that she was willing to show him what she liked, that she wasn't complaining about his lack of finesse or laughing at him.

"What else do you like?" he asked huskily.

It was like drinking wine. She felt drunk on him. She was woman enticing man. She was a siren trapping a sailor, giddy with her own power.

Her hands eased up to the shoulders of the leotard, and, holding his fascinated gaze, she drew it down and bared her taut breasts.

"Oh, God . . ." He shuddered as he saw their creamy fullness, the dark mauve points lifting gracefully toward him. "Oh, God, you're beautiful, baby. . . .!"

She felt beautiful. She felt achingly hungry as well. She reached up with trembling hands to take his hard face and draw it toward her body. "I want you to put your lips . . . here." She touched her breasts lightly, caressing their swollen peaks.

He eased his hands under her bare back to lift her, and when he touched his mouth to her soft breast, she began to tremble like a rain-tossed leaf. She arched her soft body up to him with a tiny whimpered plea.

When he lifted his head, her expression shocked and delighted him. Her eyes were half-closed, watching him, her lips parted over pearly teeth. Her face was alive with color.

She lifted herself up gracefully and kneeled in front of him. Her eyes traced his torso, and she seemed to sway toward him.

"Oh, Ty. . ." It was as much a moan as a whisper. She put her mouth on his and kissed him hungrily, feeling his arms come around her, crushing her, trembling as they fit her exquisitely to the contours of his chest. It was so sweet. So sweet . . .

The sudden intrusion of a knock on the front door made her almost sick with frustration.

She jerked back. He looked as dazed as she felt. He looked at her one last time and cursed under his breath as he helped her back into the leotard.

He got to his feet gracefully and was just shouldering into his shirt when they heard footsteps. Erin looked toward the door. He reached down a hand to help her up. But instead of letting her go, he held her just in front of him. "Erin, we've got to do something about this," he said solemnly. He hesitated uncharacteristically. "I want

you." He said it in a whisper, as if it were some terrible secret.

She drew in a slow breath. "I know." She could have said the same thing, but she was afraid to give him that kind of power over her. His hands gripped her arms painfully hard just as José came to the door.

"*Señor*, it is the foreman, *Señor* Grandy. A wild dog has brought down a calf."

"Damn," Ty muttered. Instantly he was the powerful cattle baron again—cold, relentless, indomitable; a formidable adversary. And a stranger. "Get my .30-.30 and bring me a box of ammunition," he ordered José. "And tell Grandy to wait for me."

"*Si, señor*," José said graciously, and left them.

He came close then, framing Erin's face in his lean hands. "I may be late. Don't wait up."

He bent and put his mouth softly against hers, with a new tenderness. She smiled against his lips and bit at the lower one.

He jerked back, frowning. And then he repeated the tiny caress on her own lip.

"How do you know so much about kissing?" he murmured.

"Because up until you came along, that was all I ever did with boys," she replied, and searched his eyes.

He brushed his finger against her mouth, brooding. "Erin... No. I can't talk about it now."

He left her without a backward glance, taking his rifle and ammunition from José on his way through the hall.

What, she wondered, had he been about to say to her?

SHE HEARD the sound of heavy footsteps coming down the hall. The next instant, the door to her bedroom swung open.

Ty stripped off his gloves as he walked into the room, leaving the door open. "My, my," he murmured, studying the picture she made. "And I thought men only saw mirages in the desert."

"It's more a nightmare than a mirage under my gown," she muttered, scrambling for the covers.

He moved closer to the bed, gripping his gloves in one hand as he walked toward her. He was still wearing the shepherd's coat, and his hat was tilted at an arrogant angle over his face. "Why did you do that?"

She blinked. "Do what?"

"Rush under the blankets like that, the minute I walked in?" Even as he spoke, he was stripping away the covers.

"No!" she cried as he stripped the gown up to her waist with his free hand, exposing the scarred hip.

It wasn't a pretty sight, despite the fact that it had healed since the wreck. But the scars didn't bother him—only her attitude toward them. He looked into her wide, frightened green eyes and smiled.

She backed up on the pillows and stared at him, heart pounding. "It's gruesome," she said under her breath. "I can't bear to look at it."

"But then you're a cream puff, honey," he said. "I've lived on a ranch all my life. I've seen things and done things that would turn your pretty hair white. By comparison, a few little hairline scars aren't much."

"They are to me!"

"Considering how you came by them, I guess so," he replied, his tone quiet, almost sympathetic. He touched the newest scar gently, where it was still tender. Erin saw his face grow pale, watched his jaw tense.

She was beginning to understand him. It wasn't that he didn't feel anything. He'd just grown adept at hiding his feelings. She remembered what he'd told her about having two strikes against him with women, and she imagined he'd been taunted all his life about his lack of looks. She grimaced at the pain she felt emanating from him.

"You're very human after all, aren't you?" she asked softly. "You lock it all up inside you and keep people from seeing, but things hurt you just as much as they hurt me. I know you feel bad about what happened, Ty. I'm not bitter anymore. I've stopped hating you for it. Does that help?"

He touched her hair lightly. "You see too deeply," he whispered roughly. "God, I'm sorry, honey," he said softly. "Sorry I wouldn't listen, sorry I didn't go after you. Bruce fed me a bunch of lies..."

She lifted her head and looked up at him. "I never told him about us," she said honestly, holding his eyes. "And I certainly never accused you of... of fumbling."

"I should have known that, shouldn't I?" he asked, his voice deep. He traced her mouth with his finger. "If you were the kind of woman who'd laugh at a man, you'd have done it today. But you didn't. Instead of making fun of me, you took my hand and showed me how to touch you."

She blushed and buried her face in his warm throat.

He laughed softly. "Bruce fed you some bull, too, honey, or haven't you cottoned on to that by now?"

"About your sordid reputation and the harem you kept?" she asked, keeping her red cheeks hidden.

"That's about the size of it," he agreed. "I'm not a virgin, but I've never been much of a rounder. Men who look like I do don't score that often."

That brought her head up. "You're sexy," she murmured. She dropped her eyes to his chest. "And arrogant," she continued. "Bad-tempered. Impatient..."

"You could have stopped at 'sexy,'" he said.

"No, I couldn't," she said. "We don't want you to get conceited."

He stared down at her. "Bruce knew that I wanted you."

Her heart jumped. "I didn't. Not until that night." She lowered embarrassed eyes to the coverlet. "I'm sorry I disappointed you," she added hesitantly. "I didn't know much."

"You didn't disappoint me. I think you were a hell of a lot more disappointed than I was." He watched her intently. "You got nothing out of it except pain and a baby that I cost you with my black temper."

She shook her head. "The baby wasn't meant to be," she said gently. And she meant it. "You can't spend your whole life blaming yourself for it."

"Can't I?" he asked coldly.

"You'll get married someday," she said, hating the thought even as it was forming. "You'll have other children."



"Sure, maybe I could advertise. 'Rich man with no looks seeking wife....'"

"All right, if you're going to wallow in self-pity, maybe I will, too," she shot back, infuriated with him. "I'm scarred and crippled, and no longer a virgin. So maybe now that I'm independently wealthy, I could use the same kind of ad for myself!"

He laughed roughly. "My God, Erin, do you realize how small Ravine is? Doesn't the talk about you and me bother you?"

She looked up, surprised. "Are people really talking?"

He sighed. "I'm afraid so. One of the men mentioned something he'd heard." He didn't tell her that the man had mentioned it himself, or that Ty had planted a hard fist right in the middle of his face.

She shifted quietly on the bed. "Well, there's nothing to be done about it," she said after a minute.

"There's one thing we could do," he said.

He turned away and looked at the mud on the sole of his boot. "We've already agreed that I may grow old trying to find a woman who'll have me, what with my looks. And you don't seem too confident about getting a man. And neither of us has slept with anyone else since you left." He glanced at her. "Maybe we could learn to get along, if we worked at it. You might as well have my name as well as half my ranch."

"Thanks," she said curtly. "What a sweet proposal of marriage."

"It's the only solution I see."

Erin's lower lip trembled, and she tugged the covers up higher. How in

the world had it come to this so suddenly?

"I don't want to have to walk down the aisle dragging my leg behind me."

"After we've done those exercises for a few weeks, you won't be dragging it behind you," he told her. "You'll improve. But it's going to take time and effort and hard work. And no backsliding."

"Tyrant," she muttered. "All right, I'll do it, even if I curl up and die of pain."

"When?" he asked, his voice strangely husky, his eyes searching hers.

"When do you want to?" she asked warily.

"Next week." When she gasped, he added, "Well, that's how it has to be unless you want newspaper coverage. I'm newsworthy—homely face and all."

"You are not homely. Will you please stop running yourself down?" she asked, exasperated.

"If you'll stop talking about your gimpy leg, I'll stop talking about my homely mug," he replied.

"Done."

He moved off the bed and started out the door.

"That's it?" she queried, astonished. "That's all?"

"As good as," he replied. "I'm doing the decent thing and getting out of here, like a thoughtful prospective bridegroom. Don't stay up too late. We want to get a good start on those exercises in the morning. Sleep tight, now." And he closed the door behind him.

She stared at the door. What a proposal! She only wished she had some priceless Ming vase to fling.

Ty, meanwhile, was walking down the long hallway whistling softly, his face animated, full of life—and almost handsome. He grinned, and then he laughed. It was going to be a long, hard road, but he was going to make up to her for every horrible thing that had happened. He was going to spoil her rotten.

\*

ERIN HAD hoped that being engaged would change Ty. Not so. He was the same as before, right down to the purely domineering way he made her do the hated exercises and stood over her the whole time.

He never used to use endearments, but now he was calling her "honey" every chance he got. She smiled a little at that telling change of character. Well, she conceded, perhaps he had changed a bit.

If only she could believe that he really felt something for her, something more than pity and desire and a need to make restitution for what he'd done to her. It was so difficult to read him, even now. She didn't want pity or guilt from him. She thought about the tenderness of his hands, the hungry roughness of his mouth.... She wanted him, that was undeniable. But she wanted something else as well. She wanted him to...need her. Yes. Need her. Because she...needed him. There was another word, too, a deeper word. But she was afraid to even think it. That would come later, perhaps, if things worked out.

She went back to the hated exercises for the first time without being told. She had to get back on her feet, she had to be whole again; because it was imperative that she show him she could

stand alone. Then, if he still turned to her after that, without pity and without guilt...then there might be the hope of something deeper between them.

But until he saw her as a woman, and not some crippled songbird with a broken spirit, she could never be sure of him—or herself.

\*

TY AND ERIN were married in a quiet ceremony. It only took a few minutes, and as Ty slid the small circle of gold onto her finger, he brushed his lips gently against her mouth in a kiss that was more promise than reality.

They returned to Staghorn for the reception. Conchita had hired a caterer to help so that there would be plenty of food. It seemed to take forever for the guests to eat their fill, and by then Ty was into a heavy discussion with two of the neighboring ranchers about the growing number of oil fields in the area.

Erin felt guilty for being so irritable, but she was fuming long before the last piece of cake had been finished off. She went into the kitchen with Conchita and helped her wash dishes.

Ty found them there half an hour later. He stopped in the doorway, watching. "What a hell of a way to spend your wedding day," he said shortly.

"You're just jealous because nobody would pay to watch you and Mr. Hawes and Mr. Danson stand around and talk oil and cattle for two hours."

"So that's it," he murmured.

Conchita put her dish towel aside. "Go off and fight, and then you can make up properly."

They waited, glaring at each other in silence.

"I don't want to make up with you," Erin told Ty furiously.

"So stay in here and pout," he replied. "I can always go work off my temper with the men."

"Good!"

He glared at her, turned on his heel, grabbed his Stetson, slammed it onto his head, and stomped off toward the porch. The door crashed loudly behind him.

Erin flung a plate at the door. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Ty stayed away all day. He came in about midnight, dirty and disheveled and half out of humor, and found her asleep in her own room. He glared at her sleeping form for a long moment before he closed the door again and went to his room to spend a cold, unsatisfying night by himself.

The next morning, Erin was up before breakfast, exercising by herself in the living room. She'd show him! She'd get better, then she'd leave him! She was going full steam when Ty walked into the room.

"You were sawing logs when I came home," he remarked.

"Oh, then you did finally come home?" she asked sarcastically. "How kind of you."

"You started it," he muttered.

"No, you did." She glared at him. "Ignoring me like that in front of everybody, letting me go off and wash dishes on my wedding day! How could you!"

He took a deep breath. "I'll remind you that this is no conventional love match. We got married to keep gossip down, didn't we? Or is there a reason I don't know about?"

He was sorry he'd opened his mouth when he saw the life drain out of her. All the lovely brightness, all the excitement that had given her such beauty yesterday... gone. He hadn't thought about it from her point of view. Women took things so seriously. His eyes narrowed as he watched her sitting there, slightly stooped, and it suddenly occurred to him that she might have expected him to behave like a... well, like a bridegroom. He'd been so busy trying not to frighten her that he'd obviously gone overboard. Now she thought he didn't want her, that he didn't care.

It was a long week, during which she and Ty met at the table and nowhere else.

FINALLY Saturday came. Ty was to escort Erin to San Antonio to shop. He looked rich and important in his cream-colored dress Stetson and boots—and every inch the Texan in faded jeans and a denim jacket. Erin felt a little dowdy beside him in her simple gray jersey dress. She didn't have many clothes, but she wasn't going to spend money buying new ones. She still didn't feel entitled to her share of the ranch.

"Is there any particular place you'd like to go?" Ty asked politely as they reached the outskirts of the city.

"I don't care," she murmured, staring out the window at the sprawling metropolis. She bit her lower lip hard as sidewalks and pedestrians blurred past the window of the Lincoln.

He glanced at her as a parking lot caught his attention, near the Alamo. He pulled into the last vacant spot and

parked before he turned to her with blazing silver eyes.

"I know the perfect spot."

He took her arm and escorted her down the street, into an elegant old hotel. She watched, wide-eyed, as he booked a room. A minute later, he took the key, signed the register, and led her into the elevator.

The room was old but elegant, done up in shades of green. And there was a huge king-size bed.

"What are we doing here?" she asked hesitantly.

He locked the door and laid the key on the dresser before he turned toward her, his eyes as deep and mysterious as a winter day. He took her purse away from her and then proceeded to undress her.

"You and I need a lot of privacy." He removed the dress and her slip and laid them aside. "We haven't had it at the ranch. But we'll have it here." He bent and put his mouth softly over hers, feeling it tremble. "There's nothing to be afraid of, Erin," he murmured. "I won't hurt you this time."

His eyes adored her for several long moments before he bent and removed the last silken undergarment. She was a little self-conscious, especially about the scars; but he didn't seem to mind them, and after a minute she relaxed and let him lower her to the bed.

There were rustling sounds as he undressed, and a minute later she felt him slide under the cool sheets beside her.

"Now," he whispered, moving above her so that he could look down into her eyes. "Now, here, our marriage begins."

She pushed at his chest until she felt the erotic combination of hard muscle and abrasive hair. Her hands were fascinated by it, by the pulsating feel of it.

"Oh, Ty..." She moaned as his mouth came down over hers, feeling him tense, feeling the weight and warmth and maleness of him settling against her. His tongue probed inside her mouth, and she opened her lips to give him access, feeling him tremble.

"You're my woman, Erin," he murmured, his lips a breath away from hers. "You are the first woman—in every way that counts," he said. "I'll do anything you want, anything I can to make you feel pleasure."

She arched her back a little, feeling the magic, feeling her femininity blossoming under his ardent gaze. And he bent suddenly and opened his mouth over the peak of her soft breast.

Her hands guided him, showed him where to touch her, how to please her with his mouth and hands. When he reached the softness of her inner thighs, she shuddered and cried out.

He grew drunk on the sound of those soft little cries, but carefully controlled the pulsating fever of his own body.

He eased over her, and felt her arching under him, felt her hands at the back of his thighs, guiding, showing him where she was the most vulnerable, teaching him the rhythm she needed.

"Sweet," he whispered.

She was moaning now, her skin glistening, her hair damp. Her eyes were half-closed, glazed, her lips swollen and parted. She tossed her head restlessly back and forth on the bed.

Suddenly she cried out and opened her eyes wide. Her face contorted. Her

hips moved with his, moved, moved, until all at once, she shuddered uncontrollably and began to cry as her body went into spasm after spasm.

He saw her eyes for an instant, and then her face blurred as he was hurled through time in an explosion of unbearable brilliance—light and color and rainbows and waterfalls . . . Then, at last, all was still.

She felt him in every cell of her body and clung to him while the world swayed drunkenly around them. . . .

The ceiling came into sharp focus. She stared at it, trembling, her skin saturated with warmth and dampness and pleasure. Her hands smoothed down the long, muscular line of his back.

He opened his eyes lazily and smiled when he saw her expression. "No comment?"

She smiled back and shook her head. "How about, 'Wow'?"

He laughed and brushed her mouth with his. "And now," he said, "how would you like to go shopping?"

She laughed. "I think I'm too weak to walk."

"Then I'll carry you." He searched her eyes. "No more regrets?"

"No more."

Erin felt deliciously weary and fulfilled. He was more man than she'd ever known, and it was all of heaven to be his wife. She smiled to herself. What a beautiful start for a marriage, she thought. It could only get better.

ERIN WALKED through the stores with Ty in a kind of dazed pleasure. He held her arm possessively, as if he might be afraid of losing her, and she pressed close beside him, drowning in the newness of belonging.

He needed a new watchband, so they stopped in a jewelry store. And after Ty had picked out a band and mumbled something to the jeweler, who was going to put it on for him, the friendly clerk talked him into trying on a ring. And Erin got an idea.

She hadn't thought what to get him for Christmas, and she wasn't really sure that he'd like a wedding ring. But she had several hundred dollars saved up. She saw him gazing steadily at a gold band inset with a string of diamonds. When the jeweler called him to look at the watchband, Erin motioned to the store clerk. While Ty was busy she quickly wrote a check and told the clerk to put the ring in a jar of jewelry cleaner.

"What are you doing? I'm ready to go," Ty said as the clerk came back with a small sack.

"I needed some jewelry cleaner," she said with a straight face.

"What do you need to clean?" Ty asked. "All you wear is that wedding ring."

"When I can keep up with it." She sighed. "I lost it for awhile this morning. I know I left it on the sink, but when I went to get it, it had disappeared. And a few minutes later, it was back." She glanced at his rigid features. "Maybe I'm losing my mind."

She didn't see him exchanging a grin with the jeweler. Which was just as well.

The last stop Erin wanted to make was at a Christmas-tree lot. "We have to," she pleaded. "I can't celebrate Christmas without a tree to decorate."

He studied her. "Conchita usually sets up a little manger scene. . . ."

"I want a tree," she moaned.

He sighed loudly. "Women."



"Men," she replied.

"I think we'll put you on the very top," he whispered. "You're as pretty as any angel I've ever seen."

"You sweet old thing," she said, and reached up to kiss him.

"I'm not that old." He grinned.

THERE WAS a tenderness between them now that she noticed in the simplest acts. At dinner that evening, he seated her at the table. He creamed her coffee. And when he wasn't doing things for her, he watched her, stared at her with the most curious expression. She felt protected and safer than ever before in her life.

"Did your mother even come to see about you at the hospital?" he asked as they sat over a second cup of coffee.

She shook her head. "She and I have never been close, you know."

Her hand closed around his. "They told me that I was calling you when they brought me in. It was already too late to save the baby, but I felt so empty and alone and frightened," she recalled, studying his lean hand. She saw it contract jerkily around her fingers.

He stood up suddenly, moving away from the table. "I'd better get some paperwork done," he said in a harsh, haunted tone.

"Ty..." she began. "I wasn't trying to get at you," she said desperately. "You take every single thing I say at face value."

He turned and looked at her, his eyes blazing. "Do I? And without reason? You haven't forgiven me for what happened. In your heart, you blame me for the condition you're in and for losing the baby. And maybe I blame

myself, too. Maybe neither of us is willing to go that last step—to trusting each other. So it might not be a bad idea to step back and take a look at things before we start making commitments we don't really feel."

Her mind was spinning. Did he mean that he didn't want a commitment to her? Did he want her to get well so that she could go away and leave him?

She started to ask him, but he was already striding away. All the buoyancy, the magic of the day, seemed to have vanished.

\*

BY CHRISTMAS week, Erin began to notice how much she'd changed since coming to Staghorn. She'd been doing her exercises faithfully, even though Ty no longer watched her, and she was making progress. She could walk for the first time without the cane. Her scars were fading. Her face had regained most of its radiance, and she was gaining weight. She looked more and more like the model Bruce had first brought to Staghorn.

When Erin saw Ty standing in the doorway while she exercised one morning she got to her feet and brushed back her hair.

"Something's wrong, isn't it?" she asked. "You look worried."

"I'm having a few financial problems," he said after a moment. "Or should I say, we're having a few financial problems, Mrs. Wade?"

"How bad is it?" she asked.

"Bad enough." He sighed. "I invested heavily in a consignment of grain to feed my cattle this winter. The silos were owned by a corporation that defaulted, and the grain was confis-

cated. I had to take a loss by selling off cattle in a bad market," he explained. "We may lose half of that we own."

She smiled gently. "Well, half isn't so bad, is it, considering the size of Staghorn?"

"Could you live with half a body?"

"I've been doing it, haven't I?"

And that's all it took to set him off again. Without another word, he wheeled and walked out of the room.

SHE WAS UP and dressed early on Christmas morning. Ty was already sitting in the living room when she walked in, and he looked wonderful in tailored slacks and a neat striped shirt. His hair was clean and meticulously combed, his face shaven. Erin knew he'd done it for her sake, and she wanted to thank him—or at least smile at him—but there'd been too much tension between them lately; she felt awkward and uncomfortable just being around him.

"Merry Christmas," she said politely.

"Merry Christmas." Ty stood up as she approached, motioning her to sit down across from him.

Erin and Ty were alone, completely alone, for the first time since the day they'd bought the tree.

He seemed to be nervous himself. He moved restlessly to the tree, picked up her present and handed it to her.

"We might as well get this out of the way," he said gruffly, pausing to pick up the box with his own name on it.

Erin, sitting quietly with her present beside her on the sofa, felt really uncomfortable as she watched him open it. What was he going to think of the ring? Would he be angry? Would he be surprised?

He removed the wrapping and looked inside at the smaller box. Glancing curiously at her, he picked it up, slowly unwrapped it and then opened it.

His expression was one of numb shock. She got up and knelt a little awkwardly beside him. "I'm sorry," she said, reaching for the box.

He caught her wrist. "Here," he said in an odd, gruff tone. "Put it on."

It took a moment for her to realize that he wanted her to put it on his finger. She fumbled it out of the box nervously and slid it onto his ring finger.

He looked up then, his eyes strange and glittering, holding hers.

"You don't...mind?" she faltered.

He put his hands on either side of her face, searching her fascinated eyes, and bent over her. His mouth descended, pressing her lips softly apart, shocking her with the aching tenderness of his kiss.

Tears stung her eyes as she closed them. It had been so long since he'd touched her, since he'd kissed her. She wanted to reach up, to hold him to her and savor the sweetness of being near him at last. But it was too soon; there had been so many misunderstandings between them.

She pulled back gently and lowered her face.

"Thank you," he said. He wanted to add that he wouldn't take the ring off until he died, that it would always remind him of her.

"You're welcome," she said shyly. "I...bought it the day we went to San Antonio." She shifted a little, tugging at the skirt of her dress. "I...had a little money saved."

He looked down at the ring. Diamonds. Real ones, set in gold. He sighed as he looked at the box he had wrapped for her. He hadn't known how she'd feel about a ring now, so he'd taken back the ring he'd bought her before all the difficulties began and traded it for an emerald necklace. It had reminded him of her—bright and delicate and beautiful.

He handed her the package and she opened it, catching her breath at the sight of the exquisitely crafted necklace nestled in the velvet lining of the box.

"Oh, it's so lovely," she whispered, touching it.

She laced it around her neck and secured it, lovingly touching the stone as she smiled. "Thank you," she said softly, her voice tender and husky.

Her eyes caught the flash of desire in his, and she hesitated about touching him. But in the end, her pleasure at his gift forced her forward. Shyly, she reached up and kissed the corner of his mouth, just faintly brushing it.

"Thank you so much, Ty," she whispered.

He stiffened at the touch of her lips, trying not to betray how vulnerable he felt when she came close. Her gentle rejection of him earlier had hurt. He didn't want to risk it a second time, so he didn't touch her. When her lips moved away, he just looked at her, noticing the heavy shadows under her green eyes, the paleness of her face. She was beautiful, but there was a haunting sadness about her, a sadness he felt responsible for.

"I'm glad you like it," he said, rising. He moved away from her, pacing restlessly.

"The financial situation," she said after a minute. "Is it any better?"

His broad shoulders lifted and fell. "Not appreciably."

She bit her lower lip, thinking. She was walking much better now. And the more she exercised, the better she got. Before long, she'd be walking easily. The facial scars were fading, too. She was a new woman already. And she had talent, and the contacts to go back into modeling. Perhaps she could make enough money to help him out.

She sat back down on the sofa. "I've been thinking," she said hesitantly, glancing at him. "I'm improving every day. In a little while, I might be well enough to go back to New York and get back on with my agency."

His back went ramrod stiff. So here it was—she was feeling her beauty again. She was missing the old life, and she wanted to leave.

"If that's what you want, go ahead," he said carelessly. "It might be a good idea, after all."

She'd known he was going to say that. Even so, his saying it gave her a sinking feeling, and she struggled to speak normally. "I can't go immediately, of course. I'll need a little more time."

"Wait until spring, if you like." He sounded indifferent.

"No, I won't need that long," she said quickly. "I'll just take another few weeks."

"Suit yourself." He turned.

Once, she thought wistfully. Just once to shake him out of his brooding, to unsettle him. She wondered what he'd do if she peeled open her bodice and let him look at her.

He walked to the door, touched the doorknob and hesitated. "I've got a

new colt in the barn," he said with his back to her.

She followed him into the hall, forcing herself to take slow, easy steps and not to limp.

"You love your animals, don't you?" she asked.

"It's easy to love animals," he replied, facing her again. "They can't hurt you, except maybe physically if you abuse them or pen them in a corner."

"And people can."

"I learned that as a boy," he told her. "Anything different gets attacked. Haven't you figured that out by now?"

"Were you so different?" she asked.

"Big feet, big ears, a face only a mother could have loved, and a black temper," he replied. "You tell me."

"I did notice the black temper," she murmured.

"When?" He laughed coldly. "You haven't come near me lately."

"How could I, when you've avoided me?" she replied, her eyes kindling. "You've done everything except ask me to leave."

"I can't do that," he said. "You're half owner. And my wife."

"In name only."

"Not since that day in San Antonio," he replied curtly, and the memory was in his eyes, like a fire burning.

"That's right," she agreed, deliberately misunderstanding him. "Not since. Not once." She slid her arms under his shirt and around his waist, so that she could press her taut breasts against him.

She closed her eyes tightly and clung to him. "Ty, why are you punishing us both for what happened? Why can't I

sleep with you? Why can't we have a real marriage?"

"Is that what you want?" he asked. "A real marriage? I thought you wanted your career back."

She bit her lip. Was this a good time to tell him what she really felt: that she never wanted to leave him? That more than anything she wanted to have his children and grow old with him?

She swallowed. "Ty... I could stop taking the Pill," she said hesitantly. Her arms contracted as she felt him go rigid. "We could make another baby."

He almost stopped breathing. Was that what she really wanted? Was it guilt, or pity for him, or was she addicted to making love with him? Could she settle for him, when she might have her career back? He wanted to take what she was offering. He wanted it desperately. But he owed her a chance at the old life.

He looked into her questioning eyes. "Not yet," he said gently. "Not right now. We'll sleep together, if that's what you want. God knows, it's what I want. I walk around bent over because I need you so desperately. But no babies. And no commitments," he added. "First, you go back to New York for a few weeks and pick up the threads of your old life. Then, when you've had a good taste of it and I've got my financial mess straightened out, we'll make decisions."

She searched his eyes. Was that an offer or a hedge? Was it all only pity? If only she could read him.

"All right," she said after a minute. If this was all she could expect, perhaps it would be enough. He wanted her, and that could grow into something lasting.

She'd go back to New York. Then she'd come home and show him that his looks didn't matter to her, that she could see any number of handsome, sophisticated city men and still prefer him. She smiled slowly. She'd get him; she already had a hold on him—he just hadn't realized it yet. She felt new, whole, hopeful. Her face radiated with beauty.

*Oh, Lord, she prayed silently, please, please let me keep him this time. Let him love me. Just let him love me, and I'll have everything in the world that I'll ever need or want.*

THERE WAS STILL a part of Ty that Erin couldn't reach. They made wonderful, satisfying love together, but the closeness came only in bed. She exercised and grew strong, and eventually the day came when she had to go to New York.

They were calling her flight, and she looked up at him fearfully, gnawing on her lip.

"It'll be all right," he said gently. "You're strong now. You'll do fine."

"Will I, really?" she asked, trying not to cry. She searched his eyes.

He bent his head, holding her by the shoulders, and brushed his lips softly against hers. "Be a good girl," he whispered.

"What else could I be, without you around?" She laughed brokenly. "Oh, Ty...!"

She couldn't say goodbye. The word was painful, even in thought. She forced a smile and turned toward the tunnel that led to the jet. She didn't look back.

SHE DROVE herself relentlessly, working long hours every day until she was weary enough to sleep at night. Every few days she called home, but Ty always seemed to be in a hurry. He never talked, except to exchange comments about work and the weather. He didn't ask when she was coming back. He didn't even ask if she was coming back.

In the end, she stood it for a few weeks—until spring was just beginning to melt the snows and brighten the skies; until Ty's very indifference shook her from wounded pride to fury.

She took the first plane home one day, right after she'd finished a commercial; she looked and felt viciously angry.

There was no one to meet her at the airport. She rented a car and made the long drive to Ravine without stopping. She went straight through town and out to Staghorn.

She got out of the car and looked from the house to the corral. A number of men were gathered around the corral, calling enthusiastically to somebody on a horse. With glittering green eyes, she walked down to them.

Ty swung gracefully out of the saddle, patting the animal gently before he handed it over to one of the men. He turned unexpectedly and saw her, and froze in place. Before he had time to say anything, she lifted her chin pugnaciously.

He climbed over the corral fence and dropped gracefully to his feet in front of her.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Wade," Ty said with faint mockery, but his eyes were running over her. "Did you come back to get your gear?"

She stomped her foot. "Can't wait to get rid of me, can you? Why did you bother to marry me in the first place?"

"Because I didn't want Ward Jes-sup digging holes in my pasture looking for oil!" he said coldly. "That was it, that was all of it. That, and a little pity. You sure as hell were a basket case when I found you!"

She clenched her small hands at her sides, her elfin face red, her eyes sparkling dangerously. "I hate you, you big ugly cowboy!" she raged at him. "I'm tired of waiting for the phone to ring and haunting the mailbox for letters that never come! I'm just a burden to you, just a cripple you're carrying around on your conscience!"

"Some cripple," he murmured, studying her. "My, my, aren't we wound up, though?"

"'Wound up'?" She backed away a step, eyes narrowing. "Wound up! I'll show you wound up. . . ."

She picked up the nearest object—an empty bucket sitting by the fence—and hurled it at him. He ducked, so she grabbed a bridle off the corral and threw that, following it with a piece of loose wood.

The cowboys were chuckling behind Ty. He glared at them as he dodged the wood.

"Ship me off to the city, will you?" She pushed back a strand of sweaty hair, looking around for another missile. "Throw me out on my ear. A fine way to treat your own wife!" she cried, grasping a horse collar. "You big, stupid man, I love you so much!" Her voice broke as she flung the collar.

He didn't duck. The horse collar was heavy and it caught him in the chest, but he didn't even flinch. His eyes were

wide and unblinking as he gaped at her, disbelieving. Had he heard right?

Something inside him burst and bubbled up like a spring. She was still raging, something about hating him because he was dumber than a cactus plant, but he didn't even hear her—he just started to walk toward her like someone in a trance.

She loved him. Yes, it was in her eyes, in her face, in everything about her. She'd reached a peak now, her voice broken and wounded, and she was going to leave him and go be a famous model. . . .

In midtorrent, he bent and lifted her in his hard arms and put his mouth over hers.

She mumbled something for a few seconds before her mouth opened and her arms crept around his neck, and he tasted tears on her lips as she kissed him back.

The cowboys were grinning and chuckling, but none of them heard.

Her eyes opened a little as his mouth lifted just long enough for her to take a breath.

"Ty. . ." she whispered as he set her down.

He held up the hand that was wearing the ring she'd given him. "Does that tell you anything, little shrew, or do you want the words? I'll give them to you, but once I start saying them, I may not be able to stop."

She touched his mouth, feeling its rough warmth.

His hands cupped her face. "I love you, Erin," he said fiercely, looking intently into her eyes. "Oh, God, I've loved you so much, and not ever believed that you could love me back. I've been cruel, because I was so damned afraid of losing you. . . .!"

"Oh, you sweet big dumb man, you," she said lovingly, drawing him to her. "I'll love you until I die. Until you die. And forever afterward."

He crushed her up against him, burying his face in her throat, shuddering with the fulfillment of every dream he'd ever had. "Erin," he whispered.

The unashamed adoration in his tone made her tingle all over. "Ty," she said softly, searching his eyes. "I'm not taking the Pill. Give me a baby, Ty," she whispered with aching tenderness. "This time, let's make it happen."

He searched her eyes for a long moment, then slowly bent his head. "I love you," he whispered. "Come home, Erin," he breathed.

She nuzzled her face against his and smiled. "I'll never leave you."

ED JOHNSON checked his briefcase. Tyson Wade was lying on his back on the carpet with a fat, laughing baby sitting on his flat stomach, and Ty was laughing with it. A second baby crawled up from his other side and pulled at his hair, cooing.

"You're baby-sitting the twins?" Ed asked.

"Erin's upstairs," Ty told him. "But I change a mean diaper. Got the papers?"

"Right here," the attorney said, patting the briefcase. "You made a hell

of an amazing recovery, you know. Last year about this time, you'd just escaped bankruptcy."

"I had a strong incentive." He grinned. "A pregnant wife can sure light a fire under a man. And twins put wood on it." Ty looked up at the older man and laughed. "If you'll hold up that contract, I'll try to sign it."

"No need," Erin said, smiling as she joined them. "I'll take the boys while you do the honors."

"There's just one thing," Ty told the attorney as Erin scooped up Jason and Matthew. "If Ward Jessup blows a gusher under just one of my cows..."

"He won't. And he promised to lease just what he needed. Amazing," he murmured, watching Ty scrawl his signature on the contract, "how the two of you finally sat down and ironed out your differences. That feud's been going on since you were barely out of your teens."

"Not so amazing," Ty said, glancing past his attorney at Erin, who was cuddling the babies on her lap and looking so beautiful that his breath caught. "No, not so amazing at all."

Ed followed his rapt gaze and smiled. Ty had changed, and so had his outlook. He wondered if Erin knew how great a difference she'd made in the taciturn rancher's life, just with her presence.

She looked up at that moment and met his curious gaze. And she grinned. Yes, he thought; she knew, all right.








**ARLENE  
JAMES**  
**The Right Moves**



Rafferty had learned the hard way that rodeo  
life and women didn't mix. But Angie decided  
he'd just tried to mix with the wrong  
woman . . . until now.



Rafferty Sharpstone scanned the airfield parking lot beyond the chain link fence. Failing to see his familiar brown-and-white truck-and-trailer rig, he grimaced. Rafferty turned around, hands on hips.

"Hold up, boys. That sorry son of a moose and a skunk, Boyd Wilkins, isn't here."

All activity immediately ceased. Without Boyd they couldn't go anywhere. "Handsome" Hansom stuck his head out of the plane's bay door. He hopped down and did his own glare at the parking lot, then took his hat off, threw it down and stomped on it.

"Dad-blast!"

Charlie Finley shot a stream of brown tobacco juice at Handsome's feet, causing him to skitter away, cursing to the accompaniment of Ken Shelby's laughter.

"Calm down, moose jaw," Ken said.

Rafferty Sharpstone threw an agitated glance over his shoulder and strode away. The others stopped and looked pointedly at one another, knowing that there was going to be hell to pay for someone and wanting to be safely out of the line of fire. Rafferty Sharpstone didn't miss "work," not a single rodeo, not a single performance, unless it was literally and physically impossible for him to compete, which had been the case this last time. They'd all thought he was finished then, as had the doctors who'd tended the nearly severed thumb and

first two fingers of his right hand, his roping hand. But that had been nearly two years before. In that time Rafferty Sharpstone had marked the death of a brief marriage, contemplated the end of a career and way of life he dearly loved, watched his once considerable wealth dwindle, his ranch in Oklahoma shrink as a result, and his strength, agility, and determination first wane and then return with a Sharpstone vengeance.

He had faced three ugly facts from the beginning: one, that he couldn't revive what had been from the very first day an unhealthy marriage; two, that rodeo life bred unhealthy marriages; and three, that he might well fail in his attempt to do what seemed very nearly impossible—to repair an injured body and find again lost skills. In that, at least, he had succeeded.

Rafferty was hopeful that he could secure a place among the Top Ten, meaning come December he would be in Las Vegas competing with nine other top money winners for his old title as World's Champion Calf Roper.

It had been too long since Rafferty Sharpstone had felt that life had real meaning, but he was beginning to get that feeling again, and no soft, irresponsible excuse for a cowboy like Boyd Wilkins was going to mess it up for him. He'd be damned if he'd forfeit his entry fee, pay a PRCA fine for not showing, and miss out on a chance to win a couple of thousand dollars just because the man in charge of his

rig didn't have the decency to show up for work.

Rafferty was on the phone, determinedly punching out the number of every hotel listed in the book, talking to anybody he could get to talk to him, when the girl came into the building. He glanced at her at first, registering the light red hair that hung in a fine, silky curtain to her shoulders. She was more than a girl in faded jeans, goose down vest, and a piped shirt: she was a cowgirl. He knew it by the look of her boots—the rounded toes of which were soft and cracked, the tops sagging comfortably from having been pulled on day after day, the underslung heels worn down on the outside edge from walking and on the inside from rubbing against a stirrup.

She walked forward and stuck out her hand, smiling. "Angie Faulkner. I'm sorry I'm late, Mr. Sharpstone. Now if you could get a move on, those horses out there are in dire need of a feed bag and a little exercise. We've been on the road nine hours without a stop. It's nigh on show time, and I need a bath and a cup of coffee, so let's make it quick, what d'you say... boss?"

Rafferty stared at her. *Boss?* The smoky eyes darkened to the purplish color of a storm cloud's underbelly.

"Where's Boyd?" he demanded.

"Boyd had a change in plans. He said you'd understand. Seems he ran across a good deal. Denny Albertine..." Her voice thickened. "You remember him? He got killed back in February of last year. Nan, Denny's wife, and I are good friends. The three of us were traveling together, Nan and I barrel racing, Denny riding bulls and broncs. Then Denny took that bad fall.

I've been scrambling ever since." She shrugged. "Nan's retired now. Money problems. She sold her rig to Boyd. He couldn't drive two. I needed a ride." She let it hang there, the implication plain.

"I'll kill him!" Rafferty raged. "And, sister, if my horse and rig aren't all right, you're next on the list!"

She cocked her head, only pretending to listen to his outraged braying as she looked him over. He had that long, lanky look about him that she favored, and dark, nearly black hair that was clipped short over the ears but hung in curls past his collar at the back. Sleek brows hooked over deeply set eyes of a dark-bluish gray and a crooked nose. He had enormous feet and hands. He was not so handsome as to be pretty, not so lanky as to be thin, not so tall as to be a curiosity.

She needed this job. She'd sunk every cent she'd had in her roan. Strawberry. Working for Rafferty Sharpstone could be the break she needed. As his driver she would earn a small salary, expenses and an assurance of transportation for herself and her horse. With that much guaranteed, she could win. But there were other battles to be won first, and she might as well get to it, she told herself. She threw back her shoulders and lifted her chin and Rafferty Sharpstone's eyes nearly fell out of his head. It was a good beginning.

"I'm going to a rodeo. Now you can come along with me or you can go straight to—"

"Don't you tell me what to do!" Rafferty bawled. "I'm the boss here!"

She was a little woman, not more than five feet tall, but she stepped up toe-to-toe and shouted right into his

face, "Fine! Fine! You stay here and be the boss! I'm going to Beaumont!"

She started off; Rafferty did, too, practically walking all over her with those long legs of his. She was making for the truck, and short of physical violence, there was nothing Rafferty or anyone else could do.

Shelby was the first to move, running backward a few steps before turning and making a diving grab for his gear. Handsome and Charlie caught on at once, realizing that when that woman got in that truck she was gone—and their ride with her.

She was already behind the wheel and reaching for the ignition when Shelby got the back door open and threw his gear inside. Handsome mowed him down with his own heavy duffel bag. Charlie got in, bag and all, on the other side.

"Howdy, boys!" the woman called, gunning the engine. "Welcome aboard!"

She reached for the gearshift lever and pushed it into first. Suddenly, Rafferty yanked open the front door and lunged inside. For a spell they just sat, glaring. Then Rafferty's mouth tightened in resolve.

"You move this rig before I get back and you're fired!" Rafferty growled. He slid out of the truck to get his gear.

"Well, if I'm not fired then I must be hired," Angie mused aloud, and the boys exchanged looks among them. They knew Rafferty Sharpstone's opinion about mixing women with rodeo.

When Shelly Lakey had come along, she'd tied a knot in Rafferty's tail, convinced him she wanted the rodeo as much as he did and wanted him even

more than that. But when tough times came, she split.

Shortly afterward she'd set up housekeeping right away with a young up-and-coming cowboy from Wyoming. She traded him for a Canadian bronc rider who'd recently moved up in the standings.

Rafferty had been leery of females before Shelly. Now he seemed convinced women were the single biggest threat to a man trying to make it on the circuit. On the other hand, that was a mighty pretty filly sitting up there behind that big old wheel. She looked tough and yet strangely soft, vulnerable somehow.

By the time Rafferty, insisting on driving, shoved his long frame into the truck and they started off, there wasn't one of them who wasn't feeling sorry for that sweet little thing sitting up there in the front.

That same sweet little thing had just hauled nearly three tons of horse and trailer from Oklahoma to California and back again, unbeknownst to the owner. Angie was taking her one and only shot at something she dearly wanted, and if there was anything in the world she could do about it, no long-legged hunk of hungry man with a crooked nose was going to knock the chance out of her hand.

*So hold on to your hat, buster,* Angie warned him mentally, eyeing him with a sidelong gaze. *You're not shed of me yet.*

\*

RAFFERTY LOOPED a front hoof on the calf, then gathered the lurching rear feet in one strong hand and deftly wrapped them with the front, tying off all three. He threw up his arms, sig-

naling the flagman, who stopped the watch.

Rafferty listened to the applause from the stands and smiled to himself. He turned the bay, Reward, and left the arena near the point where he'd entered it.

Angie dropped to the ground from the fence rail where she had been perched. She wore blue satin straight-leg jeans and a matching long-sleeved shirt with white fringe dangling from the pointed yoke. A white scarf fluttered about her neck and she wore a blue felt hat with a High Sierra crown. Her boots were of white leather and stitched in a multicolored bird of paradise pattern.

"That was sweet time," she said. "This go-round's surely yours."

"Thanks. Hope so."

She stepped forward, hanging a hand in the cheek piece of the bridle and turned the horse toward the "out back," where the trailer rigs were parked in haphazard rows. They drew closer to the rig, and Rafferty dismounted. His rope was coiled about his shoulder and hung down beneath his arm.

"That roan of yours," Rafferty said, "that's a fine looking horse. How'd you come across him?"

"Through a man who knew my daddy," Angie stated proudly.

"And who's your daddy?"

She stopped, stared at him. She grinned. "Weasel Faulkner."

"You don't say! The old bullfighter himself. Well, I'll be damned." The horse pawed and they started walking again. "Whatever happened to your daddy, anyhow?"

Angie felt the familiar tightening in her chest. "He got old and died, about two years ago now."

Rafferty stepped in front of the horse, a mortified look on his face. "Oh, hey, I'm sorry. I never heard."

Angie was thankful for the shadows that hid her face beneath the wide brim of her hat. "We laid him in beside Mama." She tried to smile.

"Your mother, too?" he asked quietly.

"A long time ago," she told him. "It's just me now, me and Strawberry."

"Well, you seem to know good horseflesh, I'll say that for you."

"I have to know," she told Rafferty flatly. "I've got thirty thousand dollars tied up in that animal and more, and it's taken every nickel and dime I've earned since to keep up on the road."

He said nothing, and a sudden desperation seized her. She lunged forward, filled with the question that had been on her mind since they'd arrived at Beaumont. "I need this job, Sharpstone, and you need me."

"Do I?" he asked sharply, stepping closer. The brim of her hat grazed his collarbone.

"I can handle the rig," she muttered.

Rafferty curled his finger beneath her chin and tilted back her head, his touch strangely vibrant. "More than likely you can," he admitted softly. "But no one in his right mind would send a pretty little thing like you out on the road."

"I'm not just some pretty little piece of fluff." She backed away. "I grew up trailing my daddy from one rodeo to another, and I just don't know how to

sit in any one place and stay there. I've planned my whole schedule around you. So what's it going to be, Mr. Sharpstone? Am I driving for you or am I *really* out there on my own?"

He gave her a disgusted look. "Well, I can't very well leave you stranded here. I take it you're living somewhere around the Albertine place?"

"I stay with Nan when I'm not on the road. That's one more thing in our favor, isn't it, both of us living around Davis?" Meaning Davis, Oklahoma.

He said nothing to that, merely gazed off in the distance at the sound of some bawling cattle. After a moment he gathered Reward's reins in his hand again and turned the horse in the direction of the stock pens. "I'll get you back to Nan Albertine's after the rodeo in Jasper," he said flatly. "After that, we'll see."

Well, it was something anyway, she thought. She had Beaumont and Jasper secured. She could make Vernon because it wasn't that far away from Davis, and Mesquite was probably within her reach, too. She'd worry about Fort Smith when the time came. It didn't pay to look too far ahead anyway. On the road you learned to take one performance at a time.

ANGIE LEANED into Strawberry, the reins occasionally catching her chin and throat as she whipped them from side to side. The crowd was cheering her, some of them jumping to their feet, and then she felt the dull impact of a sliding bump. The heavy barrel slid along the horse's flank and slowly spun once before falling onto its side. A collective, disappointed "oh" wafted from the stands, and Angie's stomach crawled up into her throat.

She wanted to sob, yet her eyes were dry and would stay that way. But nobody said she had to hang around and listen to the announcer telling the sad tale.

Angie was stepping down from the tiny dressing room that was squeezed in at the front of the trailer when Rafferty strolled up. She'd changed into blue jeans and a pale pink T-shirt.

"That sucker was truly moving it in there tonight," he said. "Damn, Ange, that may be the fastest horse I've ever seen." He straightened, settled his hat deliberately on his head, shrouding his face in deep shadow. "Well, I know how you're feeling."

Suddenly she knew why he'd come, and an unexpected warmth swept through her. "Thanks, Sharpstone."

He snorted. "For nothing."

Her smile was soft and timid, a melancholy kind of thing, but the depression had lifted; the brooding had passed.

IT WAS THE longest week of Angela Faulkner's life. The boys growled at each other, saving their only kind words for Angie herself, while Rafferty just growled. It was as if a great cloud of gloom and doom had settled over them and Angie felt as if she were continually right in the thick of it.

The tension did not, however, affect Rafferty Sharpstone's performance. He roped on Thursday night as if his whole life had culminated in that one perfect loop, and tied his calf in an almost unbelievable nine seconds flat. The announcer told the crowd that Rafferty Sharpstone was back in true form.

That Saturday night, Rafferty added to his trophy case as well as to his

bankroll. The Jasper purse was even slightly richer than the take at Beaumont and Ken was keeping right up there with his old friend, turning in one rip-roaring ride after another until he simply walked away with the purse in hand. Still, the gloom persisted. There was no winner's celebration and by the time it came to pack it in and haul it all down the road to the next stop, Angie was on the point of tears.

The boys stood and watched her mournfully. She could almost hear them whispering to one another behind her back. "Ain't got it, poor gal." "You see the way she mowed down that last barrel?" "Nope, that girl's no rider." "Poor thing, who's gonna tell her?" She lifted her chin imperiously and ignored them.

Rafferty was in a less than expansive mood when he joined them with the announcement that he and Angie would be taking the rig on home, meaning his ranch to the northwest of Davis, Oklahoma, for him and Nan Albertine's place to the south for Angie. The boys would go off on their own. They would hook up later, the four of them, for Cloverdale in British Columbia, Canada.

Cloverdale was the second of a rich five rodeo circuit which would end for the top-ranking cowboys at the great Calgary Stampede the second week in July. One had to enter—and win—in all five rodeos as well as compete in the qualifying rounds at Calgary to be guaranteed a place in the Stampede rodeo finals. It was an arduous task, but it was one an ambitious man could accomplish—providing he had a good; dependable driver as well as a private airplane.

The question was whom Rafferty was going to get to take her place, for she was quite certain that she'd lost any hope of being retained as driver. She couldn't help feeling just a little bereft and it didn't help any when the boys began to say their farewells. She could do nothing more than nod and make some stupid-sounding noise deep in her throat.

Handsome was the most serious.

"Now you listen good, Angie girl," he said, seizing her gently by the shoulders. "I know there's those who think you got no business being out here." He looked accusingly at Rafferty. "But I don't happen to agree. I do think, however, that you're needful of a little advice." He paused, preparing her for the wisdom to follow. "You're just leaning too damned far out of the saddle," he pronounced painfully. Then, with a relieved nod: "There. That's it. I reckon that's all I got to say, exceptin' we're gonna miss you, little sister." He shook his head, clearly bemused. "I never did know a woman to just fit herself in so well—or a man so stubborn he couldn't give a body a proper chance!"

Moved to the point of tears again, Angie grabbed him and gave him a wet kiss on the cheek. He blushed like a virgin on his wedding night, aw-shucked for a minute, and then took off, darting glowers at Rafferty.

Rafferty pulled in a deep breath, nostrils flaring, chest puffing out, then slowly released it, his eyes skittering nervously from one spot to the next.

"Let's get moving." She gritted out the words.

Brushing the tears from her eyes, she stalked to the door of the truck, yanked it open, and started to slide in



beneath the wheel, but Rafferty's hand on her forearm stopped her.

"I'll drive," he said, his tone surprisingly gentle.

"You paying me all the way back to Davis?" she queried through clenched teeth.

"I am."

"Then I'll drive."

\*

THE MADDENING corridors of Dallas were behind them and the wide, smooth lanes of Interstate 35 lay stretched out ahead in a more or less straight shot all the way to the Oklahoma/Kansas border. Home, if Nan Albertine's small-frame, cliff-sheltered house could be called that, for Angie, was but two hours down the road, maybe a few minutes more. Rafferty, for all intents and purposes, had been sleeping since Lufkin, some two hundred fifty miles to the southeast. Now, suddenly, he shot up in his seat, juggled his hat briefly, finally put it to rest atop one knee.

"What time is it?" he asked through a yawn.

"Four forty-three in the a.m."

Rafferty began exercising his right hand.

"You know, I guess I was dreaming about it," he said. "I think Handsome was right, what he said about you leaning too far out of the saddle. You need to loosen up with your hands, see, and hug with your knees. Then you just kind of ease over to one side, tightening your grip with that knee, mind you, and that sweet roan of yours oughta turn like a top, and when he's done that old barrel will just stand up there like a soldier on parade."

The idea that he'd been dreaming about her technique made as much sense as everything else that had to do with Rafferty Sharpstone. She turned back to the almost-empty highway with a kind of skeptical wonder on her face, but Rafferty was suddenly animated. He sat up straight again.

"No, I mean it. I'm convinced that horse is a winner."

"Even the very best horse can't ride itself," she pointed out.

"Course not. That's my point. The horse has got it. Now we've got to work on you."

Angie's mouth fell open.

He twisted in his seat, his hat seemingly attached to his knee. "It'll be daylight when we get to Nan's. We'll let the horses roll around while we get us some breakfast, then we'll go right to work." He gave his thighs a satisfied whack.

Angie rolled her eyes. "Oh, sure. I'm supposed to drive all night long, catch some breakfast, and mount up for a day of hard riding. It's so good of you to run my life like this for me."

Rafferty glowered at her. "Being sarcastic won't get you a win at Vernon," he said flatly.

Angie melted inside. Was that genuine concern she heard in his tone?

"You're right," she said after a moment, adding pointedly, "The thing is, though, what's the point if I don't have transportation?" She forced an aloof little wave of her right hand and propped her left elbow against the window. "You going to give me a lift to the Vernon rodeo?"

He rubbed his chin. "There's room," he murmured, and Angie suddenly wanted to hug him.

"Oh, Rafferty!" she cried. "I knew you wouldn't let me down. You won't regret it, Rafferty, I promise you!"

She quickly launched the first of a whole volley of questions about the change he was proposing in her technique, and the remaining miles flew by.

It was, indeed, daylight when they arrived at Nan's. Nan came to the kitchen door in her wrapper when she heard Angie scurrying around. She widened sleepy eyes when she saw Rafferty.

"So this is the World's Champion Roper, is it?" she asked, coming forward to offer her hand.

"Once upon a time," he replied, hanging his hat on the doorknob before shaking her proffered hand. "And maybe once more before I'm through."

He had a silly grin on his face that made Angie's hackles rise and she darted a glance from one to the other. Nan's dark, curly hair was all disheveled and those exotically tilted eyes were still languorous from sleep. Angie turned away, dismayed at the feelings of jealousy that swept over her.

Nan and Rafferty chatted for a few minutes while Angie furiously prepared breakfast. Then Nan slipped away to get dressed.

"That Nan's quite a gal," Rafferty commented, and Angie closed her eyes, willing away the harmful feelings.

"Yes," she finally answered softly. "Yes, Nan is a wonderful person. I don't know what I'd have done without her these past months."

"I'd reckon it more the other way around," came his thoughtful reply. "Had to be hard on her, losing Denny like that. I should think it'd be a comfort having you around."

Angie couldn't help the feeling of pleasure that welled up in her.

"Thanks, but you overrate my contribution. Nan's made of stern stuff. Denny was in a dangerous business and Nan knew that she might lose him, but she says that even if she'd known it would turn out this way, she'd have married him."

Rafferty looked shocked. "She can't mean that."

Angie stared at him, wondering at the pain that slowly surfaced on that rugged face. "She loved him, Rafferty. You can understand that, can't you?"

"Actually," he told her softly, "I'm not sure I do."

She could feel his eyes trained upon her for a long, troubled moment, then a frying egg spat at her and she turned away, thankful for the distraction. *He's been hurt*, she found herself thinking, *by the woman who was supposed to love him*. And there could only be one cure for that: a better woman. *Like Nan?* she wondered, frowning. Or like me? All through the morning one silent question kept repeating itself. *Why not me? Why not me and Rafferty Sharpstone?*

THEY WORKED well together. Angie made the ride over and over again while Rafferty sat on the fender of the pickup and watched, occasionally calling out instructions or suggestions.

After a while, what Rafferty was saying began to make sense. By noon, she'd become comfortable with the new technique and was making run after run without so much as rocking a barrel. Angie felt as if she could go

on forever when Nan came out to offer them lunch.

Rafferty declined, saying he had to load up and get on home.

Angie helped him load Reward and then thanked him profusely for his patient instruction. To her disappointment, he merely chucked her under the chin and told her to get some sleep. Then to Angie's absolute shock and dismay, Nan kissed him on the cheek as she said goodbye and he returned it with a kind of casual, absentminded peck, as if it were something he'd been doing for years!

Angie stood there next to her friend and watched the rig turn out of the yard. Nan shook her head, a dreamy quality about her expression.

"If you let him get away, Angela Faulkner, you're one of the world's biggest nitwits."

Angie stared at the sly smile on Nan's face and burst out laughing. "Am I that obvious?"

Nan put her arm around Angie's shoulders. "You are to me, but I don't think he's caught on yet."

They laughed together as they turned and walked toward the house.

"I think he likes me, Nan," Angie said, her tone suddenly troubled. "And because he likes me, he's going to do everything he can to keep distance between us."

Nan understood that. She nodded and bit her bottom lip and nodded again; then she opened the door and they went inside. "Well, there's that Vernon rodeo," she reminded Angie as the door closed behind them.

And there was that, at least, Angie thought. That and then what?

\*

IT RAINED that first night. They called a halt to the Vernon rodeo in the middle of the second event.

Angie wore a short, hooded slicker of neon orange over her shirt, while Rafferty just turned his face up to the rain and laughed like a kid. They coaxed Reward and Strawberry, both skittish and balky, into the dry, snug trailer. Then they ran and collided as each reached for the handle on the driver's door of the truck.

Their bodies came together with a kind of warm, fluid softness that felt as comfortable and cozy as a crackling fireplace. She looked up at him, exulting at the unexpected smile that curved his lips. She felt his thumb press into the little indentation at the base of her skull, and she closed her eyes, her mouth parted to receive his.

She could feel his head bending toward her and the quiver of his mouth before it dropped that final little way and joined hungrily with hers.

Suddenly there was a boom, followed instantly by a series of crackles and hisses as one of the great stadium lights over the arena faded to black. Rafferty looked up, his embrace protective now, as if he would shield her from the storm.

He opened the door of the truck and swept Angie inside. For a moment they were an amusing tangle of arms and legs.

Rafferty watched her, his gaze frank and unsettling.

His hand came round to her cheek, turning her face toward him as he pulled her against him. His mouth covered hers, his thumb stroking the underside of her chin while his lips

manipulated hers with agonizing mastery.

Angie felt her arms go up about his neck. His skin felt slick and clean beneath her fingers. A strange new power surged through her. He wanted her. Oh, how he wanted her! A sense of awe crept over her. She smiled beneath the moist, warm pressure of his hungry mouth and felt it curve above hers.

"I knew it!" he told her huskily, his mouth sliding toward her ear. "I knew we'd be doing this if you hung around. You're all woman, Angela, all warm, beautiful woman."

Angie closed her eyes. *Warm, beautiful woman.* How could she not be when Rafferty wanted her?

She felt his fingers coil into the V at the neck of her shirt, felt the strangely gentle tug, the separating of the snap. His voice was soft but strained. "Will you come back to my room with me?" He leaned closer then, his mouth hovering over hers. She felt a chill race over her. She dropped her gaze. Feeling a little panicky now, Angie shook her head.

Rafferty pulled away. "I as much as told you what would happen if you hung around—and since you're here, I figured you were interested in getting together."

Angie's mouth dropped open. "You expected me to sleep with you in exchange for transportation, didn't you? Oh! You really think I'm like that?" Rafferty didn't answer, but the tightening of his mouth was answer enough. Angie sighed. "I hear the voice of experience, I fear. Who was she, Rafferty, your wife?"

His face went suddenly blank, except for a tautness about the mouth, and Angie knew she'd hit this nail

squarely on the head. He shifted in his seat and reached for the ignition. "You know, I really didn't plan anything. I just sort of figured we'd get around to it if we spent much time together."

"Then you didn't offer me this ride with the intention of, er, exacting payment, shall we say?"

He pushed his hands over his face. "I was hopeful, but I figured bringing you along was the right thing to do no matter how it turned out."

Angie thought on that a minute. "Well, Rafferty, I appreciate you bringing me along to this rodeo, and I still want to drive for you, but there's going to have to be a whole lot more between us than just liking and wanting before... well, just *before*."

Rafferty had turned to stare at her about midway through this speech.

"Well," he said, "I know an honest answer when I hear one, so we'll just consider the record set straight on this account and go on about our business."

"All right," she agreed, wondering what the term "our business" actually meant.

ON THURSDAY night Angie took first place in the slogging mud with a respectable time of seventeen point eight seconds. She flung both arms about Rafferty Sharpstone's neck. Rafferty looked as if he'd swallowed a goldfish.

Angie wanted to kick herself for that mindless little display of affection for the next two days, but on Saturday night, when they both came in at the top in the finals, the ebullient feelings were too much for her and she couldn't pass up a quick hug while congratulating him.

He seemed to find this not too offensive and displayed a rather expansive mood of his own. When some cronies came around, though, hoping to help celebrate, Rafferty declined, saying he had to get back to Davis. He was scheduled to be picked up there the next day by the boys for the flight to Cloverdale, British Columbia, and the third in a rich five-rodeo series.

Rafferty's schedule was drawn as tight as bark on a tree, she knew.

When she stated that she expected to drive after they'd loaded up the horses, he smiled at her and yawned and said he could use the shut-eye.

Traffic was light, and it was just after dawn when the rig pulled in to the neatly graveled drive of Rafferty Sharpstone's home. The house, tucked up in a copse of pecan trees, was long and low and lean and built of dusty-red brick. The airplane looked like a toy in the distance.

"I knew they'd be waiting," he said, and turned a worried look at her.

She didn't even hesitate. "I'll take care of the horse and rig. You get on that plane."

Something like relief flashed across his face. "Take Reward over to Nan's with you, and you keep the rig and use it this week. I'll settle up with you later. Deal?"

Angie compressed her mouth in a show of reluctance. "If you're sure."

Yanking on the door handle, Rafferty slid out onto the ground, turning to face her through the opened door. "I'm sure," he insisted. "Thanks."

Then he backed away and shut the door. Angie started the rig forward, catching a glimpse of him in the wide-mounted side mirror on her left. He was standing with his hat in one hand,

the other smoothing back his thick dark hair, watching raptly as she drove away.

ANGIE FELT like a kid in a candy shop. She had her horse and her gear, expense money and a first-class rig and the freedom to come and go as she pleased for the week.

Still, she thought about the Fort Smith rodeo scheduled in two weeks and her mouth watered. She was on a winning streak. She could feel it in her bones. Angie told herself petulantly that Rafferty *owed* her Fort Smith. After all, she'd only entered there because it was on *his* schedule.

She made a couple of exhibition runs in small local rodeos where she came in well ahead of the field. Then she cooked up a deal where she could pop down into Texas for a weekend rodeo there.

She rode out in white satin with fringe a foot long and literally blew away the competition with two perfect sixteen-second rides that left the crowd whistling and cheering. Strawberry obeyed her commands instinctively and ran with all his heart, as if carrying her to the fastest finish were the only reason for his existence. The feeling was incredible and she knew without a doubt that she'd dine on bologna and cheese, stand guard through the sweltering nights, slog through the pouring rain, live with strangers, sleep in trucks and even on the ground, own only those clothes she could lug around with her, and spend every cent she could get her hands on to feed her horse the finest grain and move it all down the road to the next ride-out from now on—if only she could find the transportation to the next show.

"Hi, Hon!" Handsome's voice sounded at the other end of the line. She opened her eyes wide, rubbing the sleep from the corners with a knuckle.

"Hey, ugly! You keeping all Iowa up tonight?" She leaned against the kitchen wall, smiling to herself and wondering if Rafferty was about to get on the line.

"The whole durned city of Cherokee's a rootin' and a tootin'," he said. "All 'ceptin' a certain feller whose chin is still draggin' the floor."

Angie's hand tightened on the phone. "And who would that be?"

"The same feller who blew a sure lead by breaking a barrier."

Angie winced. A roper was not supposed to let his mount pursue the calf until a roper barrier fell, signaling that the calf had had the required head start.

"He'll perk up," she said.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. Maybe when you get here..." His voice trailed away. Angie's heart sped up. Was she hired again?

"Handsome, is he there? Can I talk to him? Listen, Handsome, I have to know what's going on here." The desperation in her voice surprised her.

"Angela, do you mean to tell me when Rafferty called he didn't—?"

"Rafferty! When did Rafferty ever call?" Angie was shouting.

Handsome was babbling. The gist of it was that she was supposed to meet them in Fort Smith on Saturday.

"...that lily-livered, forked-tongue, low-life yellow-stripe!" Handsome wound up. "I had a feeling he hadn't never made that call! No wonder the skunk's moping around like he lost his best friend."

Angie knew he'd let her find out secondhand that she had a job so he wouldn't have to confront her personally and maybe have her get the wrong idea. It smelled pretty rotten, frankly.

"He's upset," she mumbled into the phone. "Nobody likes losing, but Rafferty likes it least of all."

"Bull-loney. He won a cool ten thou in Canada last week, missy, and he was hell-to-pay before, during, and after."

She didn't want to hear or believe what he was implying. Angie sighed. "You tell Rafferty I'll have his horse and gear in Fort Smith on Friday but that I don't expect to see him until Saturday. And don't you worry about me, either. I've traveled alone all over this country. I know what I'm doing."

"Oh, creeps, Angie, that's why I called in the first place. Rafferty wanted me to tell you to bring that Nan gal along. He said he'd pay her expenses same as you if she's willing to help out."

Angie stood with her forehead pressed to the wall and listened to him wind down after that, mumbling appropriate responses periodically until the time came to say goodbye. She ached in a way she never had before.

*That's just how it is, so you might as well put a good face on it and be grateful for what you have,* Angie told herself. This was her big chance, after all, the answer to her prayers. She was going to win in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and again in Las Vegas and Livermore, California, and South St. Paul, Minnesota, and Reno, Nevada, and Prescott, Arizona, and... She was going to win, period, and that would be enough. That was all she'd ever wanted anyway. Really.

\*

ALL IN ALL, the trip was a pleasant one. Angie and Nan were in Fort Smith with plenty of time to spare. They went straight to the motel where Rafferty had reserved them each a room and checked in before driving out to the rodeo grounds.

By the time Angie was ready to mount for her first ride, the excitement had started to knot in her stomach. Angie was slotted in the middle of the field. There had been three really good runs before her and two of the biggest names in barrel racing were yet to perform, so she knew she had her work cut out for her.

Sixteen point seven seconds later, she was standing in the stirrups and waving her hat, daring anybody to beat her time that night. She let Strawberry long-neck it until the very last moment before reining him in, and then it was only because of the shock.

He wasn't supposed to be there until tomorrow, but there he was, one heel hooked over the bottom rung of the corral fence, his elbows resting on an upper one. Angie stared at him, the horse prancing beneath her, and those dark eyes locked in on hers, sweeping away the thrill of victory and opening a chasm within her. Nan or no Nan, job or no job, good luck, bad luck, black, white, or shades of gray, she was in love with Rafferty Sharpstone.

"THAT WAS a great run."

He reached up and got ahold of the cheek piece of Strawberry's bridle and rubbed the beast's nose, calming him.

"Thanks, Sharpstone," she said tightly, gathering the reins to bring the

horse's head up. Rafferty stepped back, his big roper's hands slipping into his jean pockets.

Nan came running up to them, puffing as she drew near. "Well, Rafferty Sharpstone! What're you doing here?"

The two embraced like old friends and Angie felt the instant rise of that most dangerous of all emotions—jealousy.

"Oh, I roped slack this afternoon before the evening performance, so I traded seats with a fellow who wanted to stay over in Craven. He'll be in with the boys tomorrow morning."

"Well, I'd say your timing was darned near perfect!" Turning to Angie, Nan said, "That was a beaut, kid. I caught it from the stands." Angie mumbled her thanks.

Rafferty glanced up at Angela and scratched his ear. "All I really want is a bed somewhere, but that's the problem. My reservation is for tomorrow evening, and it seems like everybody's pretty tightly booked. I was hoping one of you would let me have your room. You two could always bunk together."

Nan said she was going out with friends but that she'd be glad to accommodate him. Angie muttered something about blocking traffic and spurred an anxious Strawberry into a canter. Nan and Rafferty stepped out of her way as casually as if she were a stranger, and she rode off with tears stinging the backs of her eyes and a strange heaviness on her.

She really was tired and the more time she had to get used to the idea of loving and losing Rafferty Sharpstone, the better for her and Nan. Not that she could lose something she'd never had.



Taking her time to get back to her room, Angie stopped off for a hamburger and fries and a few private toilet articles she'd forgotten to bring with her. It was quite late when she parked the truck in front of her ground-floor room, checked to be sure everything was secure, and carried her packages to the door, one of them dripping tomato juice. She had to fish the key out of her pocket.

The room was dark when she stepped inside. She paused and recognized at once the soft, familiar sounds of a person sleeping.

It was then that the bottom dropped out of her sack. Her dinner slid down her leg and landed on the toe of her boot. She bent to retrieve the escaped hamburger, only to dump a tube of deodorant and a powder compact on the floor. The light snapped on and Rafferty sat up in bed, his upper torso bare, one long, muscular leg showing from beneath the cover. He took one look, leaned back and grinned.

"No, thanks," he said. "I've had my dinner."

She dropped everything she was holding and kicked it out the door item by item, venting a rage she'd squelched all evening. She slammed the door on her discarded purchases and turned on him, hands on hips, nostrils flaring. She sauntered forward, head high, to the foot of the bed.

"This happens to be my room, not Nan's! And while we're at it, let's get a few things straight, shall we? For pity's sake, Rafferty, she's lost her husband, she's vulnerable. And so help me, if you try to take advantage of that fact, I'll... I'll..."

She didn't know what to do—and never would. Rafferty sat straight up

in bed, his black hair mussed engagingly, the reddish-brown shadow on his chin and cheeks glistening gold. His brows were drawn together over wide, midnight-blue eyes that flashed silver with reflected light.

Suddenly he lunged forward, coming to his knees on the bed, his hand swiping out and capturing her wrist. He yanked and she felt herself falling, felt the impact as she landed atop him.

"Let me go! Stop it!"

He shook her with his body, the two of them bouncing against one another, her wrists clamped firmly in his hands. "Do you think," he ground out the words, "that I didn't know all along whose bed I was in, whose bed I wanted to be in?"

She was keenly aware of the rock-like thighs that pinned hers beneath them, the flat, firm middle that met hers, and the muscled jut of hipbone and rib cage. Confusion swamped her and she turned her head away, but her body betrayed her even as she did so, relaxing beneath his great weight, awakening with dangerous, secret sensations.

Rafferty brushed the hair from her cheek, slipped his fingers beneath her chin and tugged her head around to face him. His fingers trembled against her skin.

It was the gentleness that finally defeated her, the unexpected tenderness with which he raised his mouth to hers. With a moan of surrender she wrapped her arms about him, feeling the hardness of his back muscles and the firm, cool skin.

She dug her fingers into the corded flesh of his neck and against the solid, unyielding mass of his shoulder. Rafferty's gray-blue eyes darkened to the

color of smoke, passion smoldering behind them.

Beneath the satin of her blouse she felt her breasts rise to the warmth of his moving hand. It was as if he filled her with his touch, as if the cloth had fallen away.

"Angie?" he whispered, and laid his hand between her breasts. She knew with instant clarity what he was asking, what permission he sought. And yet the only answer she seemed capable of giving him was to take his face into her hands and fit her mouth against his.

She might as well have set him afire; for suddenly he was devouring her as if she were the antidote for his pain. He clasped her to him while he began to separate the snaps on her shirt. He flung a leg over her, as if to hold her that much closer or to trap her there against the moment she might try to leave him. Leaving, though, was definitely not on her mind, especially when his mouth left hers. His breath was molten gold, scorching her, decorating her with the designs of passion, the path leading beneath her chin and along the column of her throat to the little valley at its base where her pulse beat a frantic rhythm. Her hand pressed spasmodically into the slope of his back at the point where it began to join his hips.

He slid atop her, and she lifted her arms over his shoulders. She felt his fingers dig beneath the straps at her shoulders and tug them downward. She felt the moist warmth of his mouth and the strangely firm tip of his tongue as it circled the hardened peak of her breast. Suddenly jolts of electricity were radiating through her.

"Angie!" he was saying. "God, Angie, I want you!" The words were husky and sweet.

She was there, at that very brink, no longer aware of where his hands went or what they did or of the individual paths his mouth traced or of the state of her clothing or of anything except the all-consuming needs he built in her, when it came to her, slowly, that the voice she heard was neither his nor hers, and she retreated suddenly into perfect clarity. There came to her then a picture as if from a distance, and she saw them together upon the bed as lovers, *almost* lovers.

But then there was that voice, which was neither hers nor his, calling her, asking if anything was wrong, and she knew in a flash what had happened.

Nan had come. The articles scattered in front of her door. Perhaps an uncertain noise or two. Maybe even the flicker of images through a slit in the curtain. A moment longer, she realized, and Nan would be pounding down the door, waking the entire building and calling for the police. Angie turned her head toward the door, called out to her friend to wait a moment, but even as she did so she heard the *click* of the metal bolt as it slipped free of the slot, and she knew that when she'd slammed the door, it had bounced back again before the lock could catch and had stood closed only because of its weight. Rafferty was quick. He slid to her side, flicking the covers up and over them both, his back to the door, his arm encircling her protectively.

"Angie? Whoops! 'Scuse me, you guys. Oh, rot!"

Angie was burning red from her head to her toes. She clutched her

blouse together and came up on one elbow, peering over his chest at poor Nan.

"I can't believe I just walked right in on you! Oh, creeps, I'm sorry. Hey, I'm outta here," Nan said frantically.

"No! Nan, wait!" But the other woman had fled and Angie was talking to a closed door.

"Honey, don't..." Rafferty's hand had slipped up the back of her neck and infiltrated her hair. Angrily, she shook it off.

"Don't you speak to me, you... Oh!" She scrambled over him, winding up on the floor, kicking at the twining covers, which he snatched right off her feet and flung over himself. "You rattlesnake! How dare you try to... to..."

"Oh, come off it, Angela. If Nan hadn't walked in and embarrassed you, right at this moment you'd be letting me—"

"I would not!" She got her feet beneath her and stood up, fists clenched, ready to do battle. Then she saw the grin spreading across his face as he looked her over.

She couldn't know what a tantalizing picture she made: cheeks flushed, eyes flashing, strawberry-blond hair blazing in the light of the bedside lamp, clothing in utter disarray. Rafferty sat up and reached for her, but she shot out of his way.

"Not on your life, Rafferty Sharpstone! Not if you were the only man alive! Not if you begged and pleaded! Not if you swore you loved me!"

He looked suddenly as if she'd slugged him, and she clamped her mouth shut, feeling like a traitor and a fool.

"You want it just as much as I do," he said quietly, as if to say love had nothing to do with it and she ought to know that. Angie ached. She hurt, literally, as if a deep pain had spread throughout her whole being and settled in to live there, forever aching, forever sharp. She wanted him to love her—and he would not or could not. She closed her fist in the front of her blouse, holding it together; then with tears in her eyes she turned and walked out of the room.

RAFFERTY MOVED like an old man with arthritis during Saturday's performance and just plainly lost out to a roper with a faster time. He was a real bear after that, barking at Angela. The two of them went toe-to-toe just as they had that first day in the airport office, and strangely, Rafferty seemed to feel better after that. He went stomping off with Handsome and the boys to fly back to Craven, Canada, for the finals there, an ironic little smile tugging at one corner of his mouth.

\*

THE CROWDS in Las Vegas were always enthusiastic and this occasion proved no exception. All about Rafferty were smiles and laughs and people congratulating him for the squeaker he'd pulled off in Craven. Why then did this melancholy within him grow? Angela. The name came to him unbidden, even unwelcome, and yet it was Angela. Still. Always. Almost since the moment he'd met her.

What was wrong with him, anyway? How many other women had he found himself hungry for, had he pursued and won and promptly forgot-

ten? That was the way it should have been with Shelly. God, what a lot of grief and trouble he'd have spared himself if he'd not bought that woman's bill of goods. He wouldn't make the same mistake with Angela. He was not a moonstruck teenager, after all. He knew the facts of life, the sad facts of life, and Angela would have to learn them, too. Funny, though, that he couldn't stand the thought of being the fool to teach them to her.

Rafferty condescended to cluck to Reward, calming him as he danced at the end of the reins. It was then that Angie emerged from the trailer.

Rafferty's tongue suddenly felt as thick as a two-by-four. He took the looped rope from about the pommel and began to feel it for slick spots and signs of excessive softening or frays.

Angie stepped down and began to tighten the girth on Strawberry's saddle, all the while talking softly and sweetly to the dancing animal. That done, she mounted.

"Listen," she said, "I probably won't get to see you rope, but it doesn't really matter. I mean, you're the best, right? You're going to put them away out there tonight, so...so I won't even wish you luck. Waste of time." She laughed, but the sound was forced, and it had more of hurt in it than humor. He glanced up at her.

"Thanks. Same to you..."

Angie smiled at him, looking almost pathetically grateful for the expression of concern. He had to look away again.

THERE WERE the usual accolades after her ride: a pointed nod of the head, a wave of congratulation, a slap or two

on the knee as she passed by some familiar face. Then there was the gang.

"Missy, you ought to be disqualified," vowed crazy Charlie. "That ain't no ordinary beast. I swear I saw wings on that animal's feet!"

"Wings on her shoulders, you mean," Ken argued. "Why, she just flat charmed that red hoss around those barrels easy as you please, like butterin' greased apples."

"You're both wrong," said Handsome, who always got the last word. "What you saw out there was a perfect blending of sheer human talent with awesome animal speed."

"What you saw out there," Nan put in, "was a well-trained horse and a woman doing her job and doing it well."

At which Handsome sniffed, jiggled the ends of his mustache, and replied, "That's what I said."

Rafferty's congratulations were a little more subdued. "You let him do it all himself and that was smart. He was up for it."

She smiled at him and he smiled back, but the expression faded quickly into one of confusion and she looked away.

Neither would look away at the winners' celebration later.

RAFFERTY RAISED his glass to the center of the small, round table. They were a pack of curiosities in their boots, jeans, and hats, with enough turquoise spread among them to stock a small Indian trading post, amid the gilt and lushness and the Vegas peacocks in their silks and chiffons and Italian leathers. But who cared? It was a night for celebration.

Rafferty had been tense at first, sliding Angie wary glances. When he mellowed, everyone relaxed, except Handsome, who was trying so hard to strike just the right chord with Nan that she seemed to be taking pity on him, favoring him from time to time with delicate smiles.

"You did good out there tonight, Angel," Rafferty said suddenly. "That's getting to be a habit with you."

Angie leaned closer, bracing her elbows against the table top. "Just trying to keep up with the boss, boss."

Rafferty smiled. "You're not mad at me anymore." It was a statement with a ring of awe about it. He pushed his hat back on his head and turned to face her.

She shrugged, hoping the others were too preoccupied to listen. "Let's just say we're both winners and that feels good. We're having a good time, and *that* feels good, too. I don't see any point in ruining it."

He nodded and his gaze grew warm. The band slid into a golden oldie, a slow blue, easy number from the fifties. Rafferty pushed his chair back.

"Want to dance?"

Angie smiled and placed her hand in his.

They were one of three couples on the dance floor. Rafferty pulled her against him, one hand splayed in the small of her back, the fingers of the other twining with her own. Nothing had felt so right to Angie in a long time—nothing except her riding, and it was hardly the same thing. This was the very heart of her, the very reason that her heart continued to beat, and she closed her eyes and held on, willing that moment to stay with her for-

ever, willing *him* to stay with her. Forever.

She opened her eyes, and to her surprise, he was staring at her, the hazy blue gaze intense. Something in his eyes tugged at her, spoke to her, urged her in a silent whisper to let her feelings guide her.

She knew what he was thinking, what he was wanting, and a thrill shot through her just as it had all the other times he had wanted to kiss her. She felt herself craning upward. Her hand crept up the back of his neck. His head bent toward her and she held her breath as he moved slowly, enticingly closer.

Then their hat brims collided and they both jumped as if from a stupor. The last rising notes of the music swirled about them as scattered polite applause brought the room and its occupants rushing into focus.

He looked at her and grinned self-consciously. His thumb began to make circles on her sleeve. "I'm glad you're not mad at me anymore. I..." He stopped and blew through his mouth, his cheeks puffed up, his eyebrows raised. "Angie?"

"What, Rafferty?" Quite without meaning to, she had laid a hand flat on his chest. He looked down at it, then suddenly reached up to curl his own about it, his head shaking.

"Aw, I don't know. Hell." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I mean... You want to dance again?"

She didn't want to dance again. She just wanted a real chance with him. Angie let her head fall forward onto his shoulders.

"Listen, Rafferty." She began, urgently seizing the first idea that came into her head. "I'm beat." She looked

up. "That's the gospel truth, I'm dead on my feet here. Would you mind taking me back to my room?"

His grip on her hand tightened. "Of course I'll take you back to your room. Come on, we'll tell the others."

They told the gang they were leaving. Heads turned as first one then another passed along a half-questioning, half-knowing look, but Angie was really interested in only one face: Rafferty's. He was smiling at her in an odd, tight-lipped sort of way, as if he had resigned himself to something and wanted her to know it.

As they turned to go, Nan broke into a wide grin and plopped herself down next to Handsome. "Well, the world is round and it do spin," she murmured.

They walked out, proud as creation, as if they could've owned the place but had looked it over and decided against it. Rafferty told the parking attendant, hell, no, he didn't need no help. He knew which rig was his. He handed him a five-spot anyway because he was in a good mood. They walked across the lot to the truck, left the Strip and its neon excitement.

"I like this town," he said. "Always feel good here. Always *do* good here. Man, I've had me some high old times in this town!" he declared, and told her a wild story about a friend of his who thought a female impersonator was the real thing and the "absolutely edifying" row that ensued when the opposite was proven by a "slick" with a pinky ring and a shiny suit. It wasn't even his fight, but he got a good piece of it and roped the next day with one eye, the other being black and blue running to purple and swollen shut. Rafferty shook his head.

"Guess I'm getting old," he said. "I can't rope one-eyed anymore."

"You're not getting old," she told him softly. "You're just getting tame."

He chuckled at that. "Guess maybe you've got something there. That could explain some things."

She sat up straight. "Like why you married Shelly Lakey, for instance?"

His mouth fell open. But he shouldn't have been surprised. Their marriage—and divorce—was common knowledge on the rodeo circuit.

Angie swallowed. "What I think," she said softly, "is that you couldn't have loved a woman like that. Oh, you must have thought you loved her, and you must have thought that she loved you, but when it seemed you'd never compete again, she left you." She shook her head. "The mystery is why you married her in the first place." She ignored the glare he tossed her. "The way I see it, you were ready to settle down. You got this heavy case of lust for this rodeo queen and she must have known she couldn't do any better than the top notch, so she made herself real willing."

"And I took the bait," he admitted bitterly. Suddenly he swerved the rig off the street into a parking lot. "Maybe Shelly did sucker me. But what about you? You dangle the carrot right under my nose and if I so much as reach for it you scream bloody murder! So what's the difference, Angela?"

"The difference is I love you!" she shouted, and the look on his face went from challenge to shock to misery and confusion.

Her eyes began to get that full feeling that comes just before tears. He groaned. The next thing she knew his

mouth was on hers. She wanted to sing and laugh and cry all at once.

When he released her she smiled against the collar of his shirt and he looked down at her, his hand gliding upward over her throat and coming to rest beneath her chin.

"I don't have the slightest idea what to do about you." He sighed and Angie tightened her arms about him.

"Want me to tell you?" she asked hopefully.

"No!"

He dropped his arm around her shoulders, and she laid her head back against it while he began the process of turning them around and getting them back out on the street again. Neither said a word and she was asleep long before they reached the hotel.

\*

ANGIE STRETCHED lazily, pushing her arms slowly out from her sides. She smiled to herself, thinking about last night, that kiss in the parking lot and the ride beside him to . . . She opened her eyes. To where? There were a few other vague, shadowy memories: trying to stand, a light in a room, her arms about Rafferty's neck, a lazy, gentle joy. She looked down at herself, at the bedspread that was folded over her and her own near nakedness beneath it. She moaned.

Then Rafferty walked out of the bathroom with one towel wrapped around his waist and another draped over his shoulder.

"Oh, no!" Angela flung an arm over her eyes.

"Well, good morning to you, too! Or should I say good afternoon? It's a quarter of three."

Her arm came down with a whack against the bed covers. "Good heavens, the horses!"

"Relax," he said with a chuckle. "All taken care of. I went out about six this morning and fed them and checked them over. Then I woke up Handsome and asked him to go out about noon and exercise them." He gave her a hooded look. "Handsome said he'd take Nan out with him."

She tucked the spread around her with tiny poking movements. "Well, um, if you don't mind my asking, what are you doing here?" Her voice sounded thin. "You—!"

"This is my room, Angie. And before you get hysterical, *nothing happened*. I spent the night in that chair over there."

"Why *your* room?" she demanded.

"Oh, sure. I'm going to carry an unconscious woman into the lobby of this hotel and ask for her room key."

Angie felt a smile coming on. They'd probably have thought he'd drugged her or something. She had to giggle, imagining Rafferty in such a predicament.

"Funny, huh?" He popped the towel at her, stinging a very tender portion of her upper thigh. She grabbed the end of it, to yank it away from him, and naturally he ended up on the bed beside her.

The connection was magnetic, electric. Their eyes held. Then in one continuous, deliberate movement he hoisted himself upward, pinned her, cradled her face in both hands, and brought his mouth to hers. Then came a clutching, a knotting deep within her abdomen and the desire surged like a tidal wave, engulfing them both at the same time. They grabbed at each other,



pushing and molding their bodies into urgent conformity, their mouths making connection time and time again, the current strong, potent; the compulsion magnetic, narcotic.

And then he groaned and flung himself away. Stunned, she lay for a moment with her arms outstretched, her pulse beating rapidly at the base of her throat.

"Rafferty!" she whispered. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" He scrambled off the bed. "I have a beautiful, luscious, sexy woman in my bed, a woman who has been driving me mad with desire—mad!—and I don't dare touch her! What could possibly be wrong?" He threw up one arm in an outlandish shrug.

Angela slowly sat up, blinking. "Do you know something?" she asked rhetorically. "This is actually beginning to make a strange kind of sense. You're afraid."

"Afraid?" he demanded. "Of making love to you?"

"Of *being* in love with me," she came back evenly.

He froze, staring, then he let his mouth fall open. "Damn you, Angela!" Rafferty exploded. "It was a good case of lust that got me in trouble last time and I'll be hanged if I'll let myself in for that again!"

He gaped at her and roared in frustration. He declared, "No more Mr. Nice Guy!" He struggled into his jeans and threw on his shirt. "The next time this happens I'm..." He paused, pondering. "Well, I'm just going to do it, that's all!"

She smiled, unintimidated. "That's what I love about you, Rafferty Sharpstone. You're a man who knows

what he wants and the exact moment he wants it."

"Oh, shut up!" He snatched up his hat and made for the door. "And get your own room!"

Angie saluted smartly. "Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"Yeah," he growled. "Get ugly."

HE WAS THERE, hanging on the fence, when she made her final run, and he was sympathetic and kind when she blew it. When his own turn came, he walked off the big winner, with Ken taking the same honors in the saddle bronc competition and Handsome and Charlie coming in a decent but disappointing fourth.

The next morning, Rafferty shot Angie right out of the saddle with a statement so casual that it took a moment to sink in.

"I'm taking the plane back to Davis for the next couple of days," he said, draining the last, cold drops of coffee from his cup and folding his arms. "The rest of you guys can come along with me or you can ride up to Livermore with Angie in the rig. Suit yourselves."

She stared at him, hardly able to believe he was leaving, looking for signs of reluctance or regret or desperation—anything! But there was nothing.

\*

BY THE TIME she got to Livermore, Angie had never been more intense, determined, or professional, and the result was that she saw her name listed prominently in the Sunday sports section of the newspaper as one of the top female rookies in the business. Raffer-

ty's name was there, too, along with Ken's among the top ten money earners. Handsome and Charlie had to settle for just making a living, though Angie had cause to wonder if Handsome wasn't beginning to feel a little ambitious. Undoubtedly, Nan had something to do with that. She denied it, however, saying only that Handsome was a sweet, gentle man with the patience of Methuselah. It was a patience Angie doubted he'd need employ for long and she was glad for them. Nan's happiness at being reunited with Handsome was all too evident.

The important thing for Angie was to compete and to win. She dedicated herself to practicing wherever and whenever she could, getting to know her animal as never before—and Reward in the process. She avoided Rafferty. That closed truck and trailer rig literally became her home, and she came to think of it as hers, so completely did she separate herself and her feelings from Rafferty Sharpstone.

They made Reno, Angie and Nan traveling once more halfway across the continent, while Handsome and Charlie withdrew to rethink their partnership. Rafferty and Ken winged back and forth to Ponoka, the last of the Canadian series where each secured his way into the incredibly rich Calgary Stampede.

True to form, Angie turned in a consistently clean and quick performance. She knew she was doing something right, and so did everyone else. Even Rafferty said so, though Angie noticed he didn't seem particularly pleased or proud. He seemed, in fact, downright morose.

She chalked it up to sour grapes. But it was impossible not to realize that something was wrong with the man when he bombed outright in the final go-round. She couldn't squelch a twinge of concern, a niggling fear that things were beginning to come apart for him again.

When she came upon him sitting dejectedly on the running board of the truck, massaging his knotted and slightly twisted fingers and the scarred wrist, she felt a kind of panic. Was it the old injury flaring up again?

With a quick, almost involuntary jerk of his head, he looked up at her, an odd, pleading hostility in his eyes, as if he'd been wounded by her pity. In an instant she found herself plunged yet again into the very depths of love and desire. She reminded herself that he'd rejected all such caring from her and she turned her face away.

Then came Prescott with a big Independence Week celebration. She and Nan arrived on the second and Handsome was there to greet them. It became instantly clear that he had a lot on his mind and that Nan was concerned enough to spend a good deal of time with him getting to the bottom of it. Angie let them go, feeling guilty for her lack of interest.

She found a kind of peace in the rented stalls, talking softly to the horses and stroking their long, graceful necks and soft muzzles.

That's where she was when she heard the fall of a heavy foot and the scuff of a booted heel behind her.

Turning around quickly, she found him standing with both hands at his hips, the sleeves of a faded red shirt rolled down and buttoned at the wrists. The sleeve of the right arm seemed

fuller than the left and she recognized the shape and the texture of an elastic bandage that was wrapped about the forearm and elbow. He saw her looking at it and pressed the arm close to his side defensively.

"Just checking on the horses," he said idly.

Angie bristled, wondering if he was calling her competence into question. "Help yourself," she muttered, moving away from the stall. He stopped her with a hand that caught her arm high up, near the shoulder. It sent a paralyzing jolt of electricity through her and she froze, staring down at the injured hand. The scars, barely noticeable before, were reddish welts winding about his fingers, which were swollen, the knuckles purplish and stiff. He dropped the hand self-consciously.

"Don't," he said, that single word coming out as something between a command and a plea.

Angie felt suddenly panicky, and tried to push past him.

"We have to talk, and now is as good a time as any!" Desperately Angie twisted away, but he caught her wrist and, despite the swollen fingers, the grasp was strong and firm. He drew her close, and the sense of his physical presence, the remembered warmth and power of his body, threatened to overwhelm her.

She closed her eyes, hearing only vague snatches of the words he sputtered. "...not working like this...fool to think I could make it...has to change...partnerships...new life...new driver..." Her eyes flew open, the gist of the spiel suddenly obvious, and she stared at him with horror, speechless, broken.

This time he didn't even try to stop her and she fled blindly, believing that now that he'd delivered his message he was through with her. They had come to the end. Bitterly, she knew again the pain of loss, the death of a feeble hope she had not even dared acknowledge. And yet there were no tears this time—only anger—wild, desperate, unreasonable anger, and it was with her still, unabated, when she reached the impersonal motel room.

She began packing at once. *How dare he!* she fumed over and over again. *How could he?* Didn't he know, didn't he care, that it was a part of her life now? The rig, the schedule, the people, even his damned horse! They were all a part of her world, the very heart of her world.

She had enough money stashed away to buy her own rig now. Gone was the time a hungry young beginner could play upon the sympathies and generosity of an older pro. She was the pro now. She'd made a name for herself, a reputation, a career. But where, oh, where was the *life* she'd hoped for, the people she'd wanted to share it with, the love that would've made it all worthwhile?

A knock came, two quick blows on the hollow steel door. Numb, unthinking, she called for whoever it was to come in. Friend or foe, she just didn't care—until Rafferty walked in.

*Walked?* He stormed in.

"Damn you!" he yelled, a fist punctuating the air. "You're not going to do this to me!"

Angie gaped. *Do what?* As if *he* were the injured party!

She hurled her first invective at him. "You son-of-a—"

He broke it off by knocking her down—flat—on the bed. The next thing she knew he was on top of her, straddling her. Her mouth and eyes were round as half-dollars.

"Do you know," he demanded, "what you have put me through?"

"You?" she screeched and tried bucking against him.

"Pure hell, woman!" he went on, ignoring her. "I can't take it anymore! And now that you've won, if you think you're going to run out on me you're wrong! Dead wrong!"

Won? Angie stared at him. Her face crumpled with confusion, fine creases appearing between her delicate brows and at the corners of her mouth.

"Well, what was I supposed to do, Rafferty?" she asked accusingly. "You have hired a new driver, haven't you? I did hear that right."

He stared at her, briefly studying her face. "That you did," he confirmed. "But what about the rest, Angela? Did you hear one other word I was trying to say? Like what it is I plan for you to do now that I've hired Handsome?"

"*Handsome?*"

"He and Charlie have come to a mutual understanding. They're splitting the blanket."

"But why? I knew they weren't winning like they thought they ought to but—"

"But we all get tame after a while, Angela," he said pointedly. "Wasn't that the word you used? Tame? Well, I think Handsome's time has come. He's wanting a different kind of partnership than he can have with Charlie."

"What about Charlie?"

"He's already cooked up a deal with Boyd Wilkins." He grinned. "Good

old Boyd Wilkins. He started all this, didn't he?"

"And finished it," she commented bitterly. "So it's Boyd and Charlie, and Handsome's got my job—and Nan! So where does that leave me? What do I do now?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Miss Angela, what I want you to do," he said cockily, his hand closing over hers. He paused, his eyes boring into hers. "I want you to go everywhere I go. I want you to be every place I am. I want you *with me*, not driving some stupid rig back and forth across the continental United States!" He gripped her hand tightly, as if telling her he would never let her go, that the doubts and the choices of the past were gone, made.

Angie felt the rising tide of joy filling her, washing away the surprise, the disbelief. *With him!* Everywhere. Always. *Always?* It was too much to take in all at once.

"Oh, Rafferty!" she whispered. "Are you sure?"

Those straight, hooked brows rose in frank admission. "Well, honey," he said, getting up, "it's like this. I tried living with you my way. I tried living *without* you my way." He placed the hat on his head. "I figure all that's left is trying it *your* way." He held out a hand to her, followed it with a lop-sided grin.

Angie couldn't do anything but hold her breath and stare at him.

"Shoot," he said. "What I'm trying to say, Angela, is that I need you—and I know it."

Angie leapt straight up off the bed and wrapped both arms around his neck. "Rafferty! What took you so long? You nearly killed me! I should

hate you," she declared, covering his face with kisses. "But I don't! Heaven help me, I don't!"

"Aw, Angie, baby, I've been miserable. Worse than miserable. Look, let's pull out of here. We'll drive to Calgary. First we'll head for Nevada. We could be there by morning, Angie, in bed by noon—and married in between."

Angie pulled back, nose to nose, and looked him straight in the eye. "Married? You actually said, 'married'?"

He grinned. "Lady," he cracked, "I'll say anything to get you into bed!"

She went up on tiptoe. "Rafferty Sharpstone," she said sternly, "there's just one thing you can say that'll get a

yes out of me and you've got just three seconds to say it."

A slow smile spread across his mouth and he gathered her close in his arms. "Let's see," he said teasingly. "Oh, yes, I think I've got it." Then he said softly, "I love you, Angela. I need you and I want you and I love you."

Angie turned her face up to his, eyes shining, mouth willing, seeking. It was all she'd ever hoped for, all that she needed to put the whole world right back into place—everything.

Funny what a few well-chosen words can do, what the right moves can mean. They'd play the game as a pair now, a team, each completing the other, just the way she'd known all along it should be.



### Solution to CROSSWORD #19 VOL.4 NO. 1

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# **REBECCA FLANDERS**

## **Painted Sunsets**



Cassie Grant could handle anything—except  
the new cowhand, Logan: For when she  
looked into the mysterious cowboy's eyes, she  
saw herself falling in love.



“Cassie, will you look at that?”

“Hmm?” Cassie Grant glanced up absently, closed the paperback book and gave her attention to her niece. She didn’t have time for reading, anyway—on a ranch the size of the Circle P, every hour was a working hour—as she had come to learn too well.

“Look at what, Amy?”

Amy, like most seventeen-year-old girls, was a bundle of restless energy looking for a place to happen. The novelty of the ranch had worn off in less than a week—but now she was kneeling on the sofa, peering out the window, the curtain partially hiding her face. “That man,” Amy breathed, and Cassie repressed a sigh. She should have known.

He had just gotten out of the ranch pickup and was slapping his hat against his jeans to shake off the dust. His jet-black hair was pressed to his head from sweat, and he ran his fingers through it in a careless motion that produced a wave of loose curls atop his head. His face was lean and nicely formed, handsome despite the dark scrub of a three-day beard. He held himself with the easy, loose-limbed grace natural to one who is more comfortable on a horse. He wore a plaid shirt, a rawhide vest and tight-fitting, narrow-toed boots—the epitome of the old-time cowboy.

“He looks like he just stepped off a Marlboro billboard,” Amy said. “Isn’t he an absolute hunk?”

Cassie restrained a chuckle. “Your taste in men leaves a great deal to be

desired, Midget. He looks as if he could use a bath.”

“He’s coming in here!” Amy squealed. And she jumped down from the sofa, straightening the hem of her walking shorts around her slim, coltish legs.

Cassie cast her an indulgent glance. *Oh, to be young, innocent and blond*, she thought, as the door opened and the cowboy stepped in.

He paused for a moment, and his eyes fell first upon Amy, then on Cassie, to whom he nodded. “Morning, ma’am,” he said politely. “I’m looking for Mr. Parkington.”

Jonas took on a dozen or more temporary cowhands every year at roundup, and this man obviously fell into that category. Cassie had not been involved in the hiring, and she did not know this man.

“Mr. Parkington is in California for a few days,” she said, extending her hand. “I’m his sister, Cassie Grant. May I help you?”

“That depends,” he responded frankly, “on whether you know anything about running a ranch.”

This did not sound good. Jonas had promised her everything would run smoothly in his absence. With Red in charge, what could go wrong? Cassie’s expertise was on the financial side of the Circle P, but if it couldn’t be placed in a ledger column, it was out of her league.

Amy cleared her throat loudly, and Cassie said, “Oh, this is Mr. Parkington’s daughter, Amy. Mr. . . . ?”



She paused, but the man only glanced at Amy, nodded and said simply, "Hello."

Amy was not one to lose an opportunity. "You're the first real cowboy I've met," she babbled, "except for old Red, of course, who's been here forever. I haven't been to the ranch since I was a kid. Mom and Dad are divorced, you know, and since Mom decided to marry that old chatterbox Peter Browning I had a choice between living in Europe with them and getting to know my dad. Trouble is—" she shrugged—"it's hard to get to know a man who's never around." Amy smiled. "I'll bet you didn't know your boss had such a grown-up daughter, did you?"

Cassie stifled a groan, but the unnamed cowboy's smile was brief, tolerant and amused as he admitted, "No, Amy, I didn't. And it's a pleasure to meet you." But then he turned back to Cassie. "Which one of you ladies might be in charge?"

"Well," Cassie ventured, "I might be, if it's nothing too complicated. Won't you come in?"

She returned to Jonas's big desk and sat down behind it, figuring that if she were to be in charge, she might as well act the part, but an Ellie Ewing she was not. Cassie Grant was thirty-two years old, tall and gangly. Her long bones would have been graceful had they been offset with appropriate feminine curves and soft flesh, but Cassie's build was angular and lean, not particularly attractive at all. "Handsome" was not a term Cassie cared to hear applied to herself. But she did. A lot.

She was wearing jeans and a rumpled, oversize shirt that made her look more all-arms-and-legs than ever. Her dark hair was fashioned into a neat shoulder-length braid in the back, but

the top sections were just growing out of a punk cut—her face framed by a cluster of uneven spiky lengths that did absolutely nothing for her. The skin on her nose was peeling from her riding all week without a hat, and her dark brown eyes could have used a little makeup. Her nails were chipped. Greg, her ex-husband, would have been appalled.

As a matter of fact, Cassie herself was fairly appalled as she thought of how she must look to this extremely rugged cowboy just in from the hills. Then, sternly reminding herself that she was behaving more like her teenage niece than Miss Ellie Ewing, Cassie asked, "What's the problem?"

He came forward with that same lanky gait she had admired from the window. "There's been a bit of trouble up on the line. The cook quit," he said.

Well, now. Cassie released a cautious breath. That didn't sound too bad. She inquired, "Why?"

He lifted one shoulder casually. "Cooks are temperamental folk. Always have been."

That was better than no answer at all, but not by much. He stood there, waiting, and Cassie hesitated, thinking it over.

Now that he was out of the sun's glare, Cassie could see that he had a very nice face, indeed. The rough beard stubble disguised almost perfect bone structure. His lips were full, bracketed on the left side by a faint line that would deepen when he smiled. His eyebrows were dark, his lashes sinfully thick. His eyes were gray, and the light color contrasted against the darkness of his skin could easily be called beautiful. Cassie could certainly understand why Amy had been so quickly smitten.

Cassie became aware of his eyes upon her, patient and polite. There was something about him, a caution, an alertness, an almost indifferent tolerance. Cassie believed that the eyes were the windows of the soul, but she had never met anyone whose eyes revealed less than this man's.

She said, "Well, a cook shouldn't be too hard to replace. If you boys can fend for yourselves for a couple of nights, I'll make a few phone calls and—"

"If you'll pardon me, ma'am, I don't think it's going to be quite that easy." Still his expression was perfectly polite. "You've got two dozen hardworking cowboys out there with nothing to look forward to but a hot meal at sundown. They're not going to take kindly to being told to fend for themselves."

Cassie frowned, more in irritation with herself than with the man who had so mildly pointed out the obvious truth. "Isn't there anyone up there who knows how to cook?" she asked.

To her surprise, his eyes took on a faint twinkle. "Well," he murmured, "that answers my first question, anyway."

Cassie was instantly defensive. "What question?"

"Whether you know anything about running a ranch."

Cassie felt heat stain her cheeks, but again it was from annoyance with herself, not him. She knew perfectly well that the protocol on a cattle drive was strict. The cook held a specific and exalted position that was not to be encroached upon; contrarily, a cowhand would consider it beneath his dignity to cook for himself, much less for anyone else.

Cassie caught herself chewing her thumbnail, scowled and placed both hands in her lap. She was certain Jonas

had made provisions for just such an emergency, but by the time she reached him in California the entire hungry crew might have ridden off into the sunset.

Amy piped up excitedly, "Why don't we go? You can cook, Cassie, and I can help you! It'll be great fun—"

Cassie was quick to interject, "Don't be ridiculous, Amy!"

Amy turned to her. "It's not ridiculous," she insisted. "It's the only logical solution. Who else is going to do it? Even if you could find a cook, you could never get him out there before tonight's meal. It's not like you can just call up an employment agency."

The worst thing was Amy was right. Any cook Cassie could hire would have to be prepared to pull up stakes and go on the trail for several months—with only a few hours' notice. There was no one on the ranch at all besides Cassie, Amy and the housekeeper. There was no one to deal with this emergency but Cassie.

She said, stalling, "I think I'd better call your father."

"Come on, Cassie," Amy challenged, "you can think for yourself. Daddy wouldn't have left you in charge if he didn't expect you to. Where's your sense of adventure?"

Amy could not possibly have known what a raw nerve she had struck. Cassie looked at Amy—the symbol of the girl she had once been—then she saw the woman she had become, and she was appalled.

Amy was right. It was time she started thinking for herself.

"It would only be for a couple of days," she said cautiously. "Until we could find a real cook to come out and take over."

Amy's eyes lit up and she almost clapped her hands in glee.

"But I'll have to call your father," Cassie warned.

"What can he do from California?" Amy asked.

*Precisely*, thought Cassie. From California, Jonas could do nothing; but once he got back to the ranch, he would kill her. His last instructions to Cassie had been to keep Amy out of trouble and keep her away from the cowboys. And so what did Cassie do at the first possible opportunity?

But the alternative—leaving Amy at the house—was even more unappealing. As long as Amy was with her, Cassie could fulfill at least one part of her promise to Jonas: to keep Amy out of trouble.

Cassie glanced at the cowboy whose disapproval was evident, but she thought she might as well make it official. "How does that sound to you, Mr. . . .?"

Once again, he declined to give his name. He said instead, firmly, "Well, ma'am, now that you ask, I think it's a damned fool notion. The trail is no place for a woman, much less a pretty young girl." The cowboy's eyes were icy. "And if you'll pardon my saying so, ma'am, you look old enough to know better."

Cassie bristled but hid it well. "What is your name?"

He met her gaze evenly. "Logan."

"Well, Mr. Logan—"

"No," he corrected mildly. "Just Logan."

"Well, then, Logan, to answer your unspoken question, I am thirty-two years old. The last person who called me ma'am was wearing a Cub Scout uniform and even he lived to regret it. You can call me Cassie or you can call me Mrs. Grant. But do *not* call me ma'am again."

Amy smothered a giggle, and Cassie was gratified to see the stone face

before her soften just a bit with the faintest amused twitch of an eyebrow. But he said, "I still think you're making a mistake."

She said simply, and with what she hoped was convincing authority, "I know what I'm doing, thank you."

He cast a last quick glance at Amy. "All right, then. You're the boss. But we only need one cook."

Cassie was both touched and surprised by his concern for Amy's safety—perception and compassion were two traits not usually associated with men of his ilk. But on that score, at least, Cassie was not going to waste time debating. She wasn't about to leave Amy behind to concoct mischief on her own, and she was firmly convinced that this experience was exactly what Amy needed to cure herself of the cowboy raptures.

Amy was a young woman of the eighties, educated in the best schools, inundated with the intrinsic values of Radcliffe, Ralph Lauren and the Republican party. At the moment, the cowboy might symbolize for her all that was romantic and exciting, but Cassie had no doubt that two days on the trail would disillusion her thoroughly. And Jonas would thank her for it. She hoped.

Cassie smiled at Logan. "We'll both go," she said.

He looked at her for another moment, then he simply nodded, and turned for the door. "Yes, ma—" he caught himself with a quirk of the lips—"Mrs. Grant. I'll take the time to clean up, if you don't mind, while you get your gear together, and then I'll drive you back up to the camp."

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IT WAS A two-hour drive—roughly seventy miles—from the ranch house to the campsite, and Amy had chattered nonstop from the moment they climbed into the truck. Cassie had tried to lose herself in her book, but she couldn't help pausing every few pages to glance at Logan.

All in all, he was bearing up quite well. He kept one hand lazily on the wheel, the other elbow propped on the open window, his eyes on the road, his expression mild. If Amy had thought him attractive when he was dusty and disheveled, she must think he was positively devastating now. He had shaved, and the distinctive profile Cassie had only guessed at before was not disappointing. He had changed into fresh jeans and a faded blue shirt, and the smell of spicy soap was enticing. Though by tonight he would be as dusty and scrubby as he had been that morning, Cassie could understand his desire to shower and change while he had the chance. There were all too few opportunities to do so on the trail.

"That's right," Amy was saying now, "a real movie, right here on the ranch." She snatched the book out of Cassie's hand. "From this book. I've never read it, but it must be good, or why would they make it into a movie?"

"That's very rude, Amy," Cassie pointed out with little energy, and retrieved her book.

"I guess that's why your brother is in California, then, Mrs. Grant," Logan commented. "For this movie business."

"Yes." Cassie looked up. "They're supposed to start filming here in a few weeks."

A faint frown creased his brow. "He won't be gone that long, will he?"

Cassie assumed that the concern in his voice was prompted by a lack of faith in her abilities. "If you're worried that I won't be able to manage until he gets back, I assure you—"

"I'm sure you'll do just fine." His drawl was lazy. "Just seemed strange to me, that's all, that he'd go off just now. Especially with all the—" He broke off, as though catching himself on the verge of saying too much.

One of the reasons the production company had been so interested in using the Circle P as a location was that the ranch was one of the few that still ran its operation much as it had a hundred years ago. Out here in the vast rangeland of the valley, with the majestic mountains in the background and the campsite in the foreground, one could easily have stepped back in time.

The chuck wagon was just that—a covered wagon. Drawn by a team of drays, it had barrels of water and flour strapped to its side. The only signs of modernization were that the wagon's wheels were actually tractor tires, and a tank of butane gas for the cookstove was strapped to the wagon.

The extra horses were picketed not too far from the wagon, for the cowboys still worked on horseback, switching mounts every day. In mid-summer every year the herds were rounded up, counted, branded and driven to the railhead spur that adjoined the ranch, much as it had been done a hundred years ago.

Logan pulled the truck in right up next to the chuck wagon, and they all got out. He immediately began moving toward the horses, and Cassie said quickly, "You're not leaving?"

He turned, and she was ashamed of the sudden panic in her voice. She suspected he was aware, too, of just how quickly she had come to regret her im-

petuous decision, and he had every right to say "I told you so." But all he replied was, "I've got work to do. And I guess I'd better let Red know you're here." He did not look too happy about that last statement, and Cassie knew there would be an unpleasant scene when he found she had volunteered to cook and had brought Amy along.

As Logan spoke, a blond boy came from around the wagon. About Amy's age, thin and wiry and not very tall, he had a quick, shy smile. Logan glanced at him. "This is Rodney Jeffries. He takes care of the stock and sort of acts as the cook's assistant. He'll help you get set up."

Cassie breathed a prayer of thanks to a merciful Creator.

"Rodney," Logan said, "this is Mrs. Grant, Mr. Parkington's sister, and his daughter, Amy. They'll be taking on the cook's job for a few days."

Rodney wiped his hands on his jeans and looked as though he might offer a handshake, then changed his mind and simply smiled at Cassie somewhat uncertainly. "Hi," he said, and then his eyes were all for Amy. But far from being impressed by a mere cook's assistant, and a boy her own age at that, she became preoccupied with getting a speck of dust off her boot.

Cassie smiled at him, her sympathies instantly reversed. If young Rodney had a crush on Amy, he was much to be pitied. "It's nice to meet you, Rodney," she said. "Would you give us a hand getting our gear out of the back of the truck?"

Cassie lowered the gate on the pickup, and Amy reached inside for her bedroll. Rodney was quick to take it from her, and she smiled indifferently. "Thanks," she said. "Just put the rest of my stuff wherever Cassie

tells you." With that, she wandered off.

"She's a city girl," Cassie explained to Rodney, a small consolation for Amy's rudeness. "It'll take her time to get used to doing things for herself."

Logan had gone to saddle his horse and Amy followed him. Cassie could hear her voice, continuing to try to engage him in conversation. The girl was making an utter pest of herself, and by the time she and Rodney had unloaded all the gear, Cassie's patient amusement with Amy had turned into downright irritation. She had brought Amy out here to show her a little of the real side of life. So far, Amy had done nothing but preen herself and practice her flirting on a man twice her age. At the very least, Amy was going to learn that she would have to pull her own weight if she intended to stay.

Cassie told Rodney to start hooking up the stove, for the men would be coming in for the day in a couple of hours and the evening meal was always served well before sundown. Then, wiping her dusty hands on her jeans, she started out in search of Amy.

The horses were picketed behind a stand of spruce about twenty-five yards away from the wagon. The sound of Amy's low murmur and giggles led Cassie to them. She pushed aside a branch and then stood still, appalled at what she saw.

Amy and Logan stood beside his saddled horse, very close. Amy's fingers were tucked around the closures of Logan's vest as she gazed raptly up into his face. Logan's hands cupped her arms gently, and his head bent low.

Immediately every protective instinct in Cassie's body surged into furious life. Amy was seventeen, for heaven's sake, and that man was thirty-five if he was a day. Enraged, she took an angry step forward.

The sound of Logan's voice stopped her. "You're the prettiest thing that's crossed my path in a long time, and if you were five years older, I wouldn't think twice. But a man's got to look out for himself, and I'm not too anxious to come up on the wrong side of your pa."

"You're not afraid of my daddy, are you?" Amy pouted, and Cassie itched to slap her.

Logan smiled. "No. But I need this job, and I need to stay on the right side of the law. You, little girl, are the quickest way I know to a first-class tour of the inside of a jail."

Amy's eyes lowered, and gradually Cassie began to understand. Logan could have laughed at her and hurt her badly. He could have continued to ignore her and only worsened the problem. By pretending to be tempted he had salvaged her ego, given her credit for the intelligence of an adult and remained her friend.

"Well," Amy said, "I wouldn't want to get you into any trouble."

Logan gently removed her hands from his vest, taking a step back. "I appreciate that. And I don't want you to get into any trouble, so if any of these old rowdies start giving you a bad time, you let me know, okay?"

Amy beamed at him, fairly breathless. "Okay."

He gave her a grin that was as sweet as a caress, and then turned and mounted up.

IF CASSIE had learned one thing in her years of charity work, it was the skill of organization. She quickly put Rodney to work setting up their tents and organizing the mess hall, and set Amy down in front of a barrel of potatoes waiting to be peeled. The novelty of that wore off in a matter of moments,

and in no time at all Amy was whining about puckered hands and chipped nails. But Cassie had no time for complaints and no sympathy for Amy's spoiled holiday. She had problems of her own.

There was fresh meat stored in a locker of dry ice, but the menu was limited to hamburger. The eggs and milk were powdered, but there were fresh onions and peppers. Cassie knew that almost everything was fried on the trail, for convenience, and thought a change of menu might endear her to those who would object to her presence. She decided to make potato salad, and it was no easy task.

She chopped the boiled potatoes until her hands ached, peeled onions until her face was red and swollen. Her back and arms ached from sheer physical exertion. She had found some cans of blueberries in the wagon and decided, also as a form of bribery, to make blueberry dumplings for dessert. That, too, was easier said than done.

Cassie set Amy and Rodney to seasoning the ground beef and forming hamburger patties while she alternated between potatoes and dumpling batter for a gallon of blueberries. Amy was uncooperative, but Rodney proved to be a willing, eager worker—and a genuinely nice boy. Cassie wished Amy would at least be pleasant to him.

Time went by quickly, and before she knew it the sound of an approaching horse could be heard not far off. Red had ridden in ahead of the others, and Cassie went outside to greet him. A short, bandy-legged little man whose thinning red hair was now turning gray, he swung out of the saddle and strode over to her with all the disdainful authority of his sixty-odd years. He looked her up and down, spat a stream of tobacco juice on the ground and



declared, "Well, I didn't believe it but I shoulda known better. Only you would come up with a harebrained scheme like this."

She smiled at him sweetly. "You needed a cook. I can cook."

He scowled at her. "You know very well there's a damned sight more to this job than just cooking."

"I've got Rodney to help me with the heavy work. I can handle what I've taken on, Red."

He looked her over again, and there was no compliment in his tone as he declared, "You haven't changed a bit. I thought when you came back here all citified you might have brought some good sense back with you, but it just ain't so."

Cassie liked the way that sounded, and she smiled at him. "You might want to watch your language, Red," she advised. "And pass the word along. We've got a young girl here, and I wouldn't want her corrupted by any rough talk."

Red glared at her for a long moment, then stalked away.

The men began to drift in about an hour later. They had all heard about Cassie's presence—and Amy's—so their attitude was wary—and not entirely pleased. Cassie understood their resentment. These men were used to being on their own, without the supervision of women; they were accustomed to doing and saying what they pleased, fighting if they felt like it, drinking too much if they had the wherewithal. The presence of women was inhibiting enough, but these women were the boss's family. It was a taciturn and mostly unhappy group of ruffians that filed through the chow line that afternoon.

Cassie was so busy she barely had time to look at their faces, but she couldn't help notice that Amy, who

had decked herself out in fresh makeup, tight jeans and a body-sculpting sweater, went from dismay to undisguised woe as she spooned helpings of potato salad onto one tray after the other.

"They *smell*," she whispered to Cassie at one point. "And they're so old. . . and rude."

"It takes a lot of experience to be a good cowhand," Cassie answered. "And they're not rude. You just make them nervous."

Amy looked both skeptical and unimpressed.

The men sat at long, camp-style tables, hunched over their trays, their conversation low. Occasional covert glances were cast in the direction of the serving table where Amy and Cassie still stood, and Cassie knew that she was making them as uncomfortable as the men were making her.

She calmly wiped the splattered grill, placed the serving bowls in easy reach for seconds and untied her apron. "Why don't we take our plates and eat outside?" she suggested to Amy.

"Gladly," the girl muttered.

Amy picked at her food, resting her hand on her cheek. "My hair is filthy already, and I want to take a shower. There's no place to plug in my blow-dryer."

"This was your idea," Cassie reminded her.

Amy sighed. "Maybe tomorrow will be better. But there sure doesn't seem to be much happening around here. Except a lot of potatoes and dirty dishes."

Cassie smiled to herself. Tomorrow would hardly be better—especially since Amy's day would begin at 4:00 a.m.

They had finished their meal in a more or less desultory silence, when Rodney came out.



"The boys are really packing away your grub, Miz Grant," he said, grinning. "I guess they like it better than that swill old Amos used to serve up."

Cassie smiled. "I'm glad to hear it, Rodney."

Rodney glanced at Amy. "I'm going to go bed down the horses," he said. "You want to come along?"

Horses and Amy were a natural combination, and Cassie did not think she would refuse. But Amy was careful to disguise her enthusiasm. "Might as well. There's not much else to do around here."

"Except the dishes," Cassie reminded her.

The sun slipped behind the mountains, shading the sky with dusky twilight. Cassie talked herself into staying a while longer, enjoying the solitude and the much-needed rest. She glanced up when someone exited the tent, and her heart gave a peculiar little jolt when she saw it was Logan. He did not notice her.

He walked over to a broken log at the edge of the wood, propped his leg up and sipped his coffee—a peaceful, contented figure looking out over the land. For a moment Cassie took pleasure in just watching him; he seemed as much a part of this environment as the meadows and the stately aspens.

After a time, however, she began to feel like a spy, and worse, she had the distinct impression that he was aware of her gaze. She left her half-finished cup of coffee on the table and went over to him.

He glanced around. "Good meal," he told her.

She smiled, tucking her fingers into her pockets. "Thanks. You sound surprised."

"I was a little," he admitted. Then he glanced at his coffee cup. "The coffee's a little weak, though."

She stared at him. "That coffee is strong enough to be used as shoe polish."

He shrugged. "Just trying to give you a little constructive criticism. Coffee like this will earn you a bunch of grumpy riders if you try to serve it in the morning."

"Maybe in the morning I will serve shoe polish," she grumbled. "Now, there's a thought."

Cassie felt a warmth tingle through her, caused by nothing more than the light of his grin, and her returned smile seemed to be formed from the inside out. She inquired, "Logan... is that your first name or your last?"

"Both," he responded easily. "Either. Maybe neither one. Only a woman would ask a question like that."

After a moment she asked, "Are you from around here?"

"No." It wasn't short, just to the point. Logan set his coffee cup down and reached into his vest pocket, bringing out a thin cigarette paper and a flat tin of tobacco.

"I take it you don't like to talk about yourself."

"You take it right." He shook a measure of tobacco into the paper, moistened the edge, and rolled it deftly into a tube. Then he lit the cigarette, watching her with a peculiar mixture of lazy interest and pleasure that made Cassie somewhat uncomfortable. "So where are you from, Mrs. Cassie Grant?"

Cassie hesitated. "Recently?" She shrugged. "Connecticut and New York mostly. Before that, here. Home."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "You've still got the ways of the city about you, you know," he com-

mented. "I guess that's why I was surprised that you could cook."

Cassie was amazed. She glanced down at her faded jeans, stained and rumpled work shirt, and broken nails. "I don't see what makes you say that! Just look at me." Self-consciously, she pushed a straggling strand of hair back into the bandanna. "My clothes are a mess and I haven't seen a hairdresser in three months. There's nothing of the city about me at all."

"Sure there is," he replied calmly. "Because you still think things like that are important." Logan's gaze was far too perceptive. Cassie couldn't meet it, and she began to fidget. In a moment his eyes moved away, and he lifted the cigarette again. "Where is Mr. Grant?" he asked.

"In Connecticut. We're divorced." And then, "Have you ever been married?"

"No." Again, direct and to the point, leaving more questions than answers.

Cassie couldn't help being curious. "Have you been doing this kind of work long?"

"I learned to rope and ride when I was a kid," he replied. "The Circle P's one of the nicest outfits I've ridden for in a long time, though," he added. "There aren't too many like it left."

Cassie did not like to think about that. The independent rancher was fast going the way of the small farmer, and the Circle P had been operating in the red for over a year. Cassie said, smiling a little, "Wyoming is a hell of a place to try to make a living of any kind. What amazes me is that it took people so long to find that out. It takes thirty acres to feed a cow, blizzards can wipe out half your herd overnight and small ranches are dropping like flies."

"It'll be a pity," Logan said soberly, "to see it go." His eyes were once

again sweeping over the landscape behind them—a panorama of greens and yellows lit now by the pinkish tinge of a brilliant sunset. "I'll see it in my lifetime. Things just won't be the same."

They were silent for a time, watching the sky begin to glow with pastel arcs of pink and orange and aqua. Nowhere in the world was the sunset as magnificent as here.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said softly.

"Yes." The pitch of his voice was equally quiet. "It's funny," he said, "how many artists have tried to capture this scene on canvas, but it can't be done. It's a quality, not a thing. It has to do with being up here all alone with your own thoughts, tasting the air and listening to the breeze, and knowing how many centuries of men before you have stood right here, and done the same thing."

There was a beauty in his words that matched the subtle glory of the scene. In that moment, Cassie had never known such a rapport with another human being before; it was singular and it was fleeting, but all the more precious for that.

"It's sad to think we might be the last generation to see it in just this way," she said.

He smiled faintly, not looking directly at her. "Everything changes, I guess. The sun will still set over the mountains, but the people who watch it won't be the same. What's left will be no more than a backdrop, like those painted sunsets Hollywood used to have the cowboys ride into at the end of the film. Pretty, but not real. And not worth much."

The twilight made a misty mirror of his eyes, and his gaze was gentle and intent. Cassie was lost in the vague and tender smile that seemed almost to lin-

ger at the back of those eyes, and she realized that he was looking at her as a man might look at a woman, and she wished she were prettier. She wished he would kiss her, and then her heart started beating faster.

Suddenly—and not for the first time today—she became convinced that Logan knew exactly what she was thinking. His expression had not altered, but one got the impression that he missed nothing, and knew far more than he would ever tell. Logan was a keeper—and a reader—of secrets.

Cassie moved her eyes away, breaking the moment. It was embarrassing. She was no better than Amy, and she was crazy to think a man like Logan would be attracted to her. All he had wanted was someone to talk to, and in truth, that was all she had wanted, too. Yet even as she withdrew into her uncomfortable role of half boss, half trail cook, she felt a small glow inside for the moment that was passing. She was grateful to Logan for sharing it with her, and for stirring back to life the ashes of sensations she had thought long cold.

"Well, there's a ton of dirty dishes waiting for me," she said. "I guess I'd better get back to work."

"I passed the word down the line about your niece," Logan said. "You don't have to worry... the boys will leave her alone. They're a pretty good lot, at that."

Cassie smiled at him, touched and grateful. "Thanks."

He dismissed it. "I just don't see any need for more trouble than we've already got."

Cassie almost didn't catch that, and then he was already turning to go. "See you at breakfast," he said. "Don't forget what I said about the coffee."

Cassie watched him go. "More trouble than we've already got." What had he meant by that?

CASSIE HAD never been more tired in her life, and even Amy was looking a little hollow around the eyes. She made no objection when Cassie suggested that she go to her tent and try to get to sleep immediately—complaining only that she wished she could have a shower.

Rodney, whose body clock was attuned to early rising, promised to wake Cassie an hour before sunrise. It was a little before eight o'clock when Cassie crawled into her one-man tent, extinguished her flashlight and changed from her soiled and sticky clothes into a soft flannel sweat suit for sleeping.

She was not aware of falling asleep. She knew only that one minute she was thinking drowsily about Logan, the way the sun shadowed his face, and the next minute someone was shaking her arm gently.

"Mrs. Grant... Cassie. Wake up."

Groggily, Cassie turned in her sleeping bag and pushed her hair away from her face, forcing her eyes open and trying to make them focus in the dark. It couldn't be time to get up already.

"Cassie," he whispered again. "Are you awake?"

It was Logan, crowding up her small tent with his presence and his warmth, his face close to hers. She struggled to sit up. "What—?"

He placed his fingers lightly over her lips. "I'm sorry," he whispered, "but there's been an accident. Come outside."

Cassie's heart jumped and began to pound, but he turned and was gone before she could question him. All she

could think was *Amy* as she fumbled in the dark for her boots and her jacket.

The night was bright with starlight, and deceptively peaceful and still. Logan stepped from the shadows, taking her arm firmly. "Amy?" she whispered anxiously. "Is she—?"

He shook his head. "No, she's all right." He spoke softly, leading her away from the camp so their voices wouldn't disturb the others. "It's Red. He's been thrown. He looks all right, but he took a bad rap on the head and his leg is broken. I'm going to take him to the hospital."

Cassie stopped in midstride, staring at him. Red? Thrown? He had been riding the meanest animals on the ranch for over thirty years and had never had an accident. It didn't make sense. She demanded, "Where is he?"

"I splintered his leg and bedded him down in the back of the pickup, as comfortable as possible."

Cassie moved swiftly through the dark toward the truck, sprang into the bed of the pickup and knelt beside Red. "You okay, Boss?" she said softly, using the nickname she had called him when she was growing up.

He scowled at her. "Hell, no, I'm not okay!" he growled. "I broke my damn leg. How'm I supposed to ride with a broke leg!"

Logan had padded the truck bed with one sleeping bag and wrapped Red securely in another for the trip. She said, "Don't worry, you'll be as good as new in no time."

She turned and climbed over the side.

"How did it happen?" she asked Logan.

His face was blank. "He didn't say."

"What was he doing out there in the night?"

"He was on patrol," Logan explained patiently. "I'd better get go-

ing now. I just wanted you to know where we were."

"I'm going with you," Cassie said. "Let me get another blanket."

Logan looked disapproving. He jerked his head back to the tents. "What about the youngster?"

Cassie hesitated, then said, "We'll be back before she wakes up." And hurried to her tent for the extra sleeping bag.

The nearest hospital was actually closer than the ranch house, although it didn't seem so to Cassie, freezing in the back of the truck and trying to protect Red from the jolts and jostles of the road. It was only a little after eleven o'clock when they arrived. The orderlies came out to transfer Red onto a stretcher and wheel him into the emergency room, and for the next half hour Cassie was kept busy filling out forms and answering questions.

Logan was in the waiting room, smoking one of his hand-rolled cigarettes. The little room was empty except for the two of them.

"The doctor thinks he's going to be all right," Logan told her. "They'll want to keep him overnight, though. Probably longer."

Cassie nodded and sat down across from him. "How did it happen, Logan?" she asked for a second time.

"I found him in a gully when I came on duty. His horse had wandered off. Must have been spooked."

"Does everyone take a shift on night watch duty?"

"Eventually," he answered. "We rotate in two-hour shifts."

"Just one man at a time?"

He was spared from answering when the doctor came in.

"A simple fracture," the doctor explained, "and a mild concussion. Because of his age, we'd like to keep him

in a couple of days, but I don't expect any problems."

"Could we see him?" Cassie asked.

"Just for a minute. He needs his rest."

Red looked pale and groggy with his head bandaged and his casted leg propped up on a pillow. Cassie patted his hand. "You're a sight," she told him. "I wish I had a camera."

He scowled. "Still got that smart mouth, I see."

Cassie's expression was serious. "What in the world happened, Red? How...?"

He avoided her eyes. "Fool horse stepped in a gopher hole," he muttered. "Went right over his neck. And this headache is killing me. I need some shut-eye."

Cassie looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, then she squeezed his hand and said, "All right, you get some rest. I'll be back to see you as soon as I can."

Logan stepped over to him. "Take it easy, Red. We'll miss you out on the range."

Red looked at Logan, and something passed between the two men that Cassie could not read. Red said quietly, "Thanks, kid." And there seemed to be more to that simple statement than gratitude for having taken care of him. Then Red closed his eyes.

The sound of their boot heels echoed loudly on the tiled floor, making Cassie want to tiptoe. In the hospital lobby Logan paused. "Do you want to call your brother?"

A glance at the clock showed her it was well after midnight, and she hesitated. Yesterday—this morning, even—Cassie would have been quick to run to her brother for support. But she had taken so much on herself in the past twelve hours that one more responsibility hardly seemed to matter.

"There's nothing he can do," she answered. "I'll get word to him tomorrow, but there's no reason to bother him this late."

Logan seemed to agree, and he touched her shoulder lightly as he pushed open the door for her. Cassie did not speak until they were in the truck. Then she said with quiet certainty, "He was lying, you know."

Logan's face was carefully blank. "What makes you say that?"

"That bump on the back of his head, for one thing. If he went over the horse's head he would have fallen forward, which would only account for the bruise on his forehead. And how did he break his leg?"

Logan was silent.

She shifted a little in her seat to look at him, determined to prove her case. "Did you find his horse?"

"Yes."

"And it wasn't injured, was it? If the horse had fallen, there would have been some sign."

Logan made no denials. "Maybe he was confused about what happened," he said. "Something like that is bound to shake a man up."

Logan seemed matter-of-fact and unconcerned, and of course he was probably right. But Cassie couldn't shake that strong feeling that something about this was not quite right.

She sighed and leaned her head back against the seat. It had been quite a day. The movement of the truck was rhythmic and the sound of the motor soothing. Cassie was asleep before she knew it.

When she opened her eyes, her head was leaning against Logan's shoulder. For a moment she did not move. She had a feeling that this sensation of warmth and strength had been an integral part of a dream.

The truck bounced over rough ground, and Cassie sat up abruptly. "I—I'm sorry," she stammered. "I didn't mean to fall asleep."

He glanced at her. "That's all right. I kind of enjoyed it."

As he pulled up next to the chuck wagon, he switched off the headlights so as not to disturb the sleeping camp, and turned off the ignition.

"Well," said Cassie, with a breath. "What a night."

"Morning," he corrected easily. "I don't know how to tell you this, Cook, but it's almost time for you to start breakfast."

Cassie groaned softly. "I don't envy you your choice of life-style, Logan. A man would have to be crazy to keep these hours."

"If I could think of an easier way to make a living," he admitted, "I would."

Cassie thought about the long day ahead. Unless she had mistaken her brother's intentions, he would be arriving today, and she was not looking forward to that encounter. Not to mention breakfast and dinner for a hungry crew and the problem of replacing Red.

She said, dealing with the most immediate problem first, "We'll need a new tallyman. I don't know any of these boys. Can you recommend someone for the job?"

He looked briefly and faintly surprised that she even knew what a tallyman was as he gave it some thought. "Yes," he decided finally. "Me." One corner of his lips deepened with a hint of ruefulness. "I'm the best qualified," he explained simply.

In the old days the tallyman's responsibilities had been limited to counting the stock as it was branded. Today the mathematics was a bit more complicated, and by tradition the tal-

lyman was also line foreman and trail boss. Logan would now be responsible for everything that happened on the rest of the roundup.

Cassie knew she was once again thinking with her instincts and not her brain, but what choice did she have? If Jonas didn't like it, he could always choose someone else.

She said diplomatically, "I'd appreciate it if you'd take over for today, anyway. Jonas will make the final decision when he gets back."

She turned toward the door, but felt his hand light upon her shoulder. He said her name softly, just once. "Cassie." And when she turned he kissed her.

It was not a quick or a sudden thing. Rather, she turned and saw his eyes, gently secretive in the night, and his face with its dark, roughened planes, very close. His arms slid around her shoulders and his fingertips touched her neck lightly.

His lips were soft, his fingers upon the bare skin of her neck warm and callused. He smelled of the open meadows and the mountains at night. He kissed her gently, his tenderness nonetheless backed by an instinctual masculine firmness. Surprise weakened her and made her pulses flutter, but before the surprise had even faded, other sensations were opening like floodgates.

Her hand fluttered against his chest, her fingertips registering the texture of smooth, tanned animal hide and then, just briefly, the thin flannel fabric of his shirt over warm, hard muscles. And with her touch, new sparks of awareness seemed to kindle within him. Quickly—so quickly she might not have noticed—his kiss deepened and was touched with hunger, and then with caution. He moved away.



His eyes were bright now, shaded by his heavy lashes, but deeply alert. His fingers touched the side of her face in a light caress and then played over her chin, holding it briefly. His breath flowed like a whisper across her lips, he was still that close. And Cassie felt mesmerized, poised on the brink of discovery and yet uncertain, waiting.

He said huskily, "I shouldn't have, I know. But I guess you already know how much I've wanted to kiss you since this afternoon."

Cassie simply looked at him, unable to speak. Yes, since this afternoon, when they had shared a moment that was unfulfilled. The kiss had completed what was shared between them, but it still felt like only a beginning.

His arm slid away from her, and he smiled. Cassie knew that was her signal to leave. She wasn't behaving with much sophistication, but she couldn't seem to think of anything to say.

She reached for the door handle and got out of the truck. All she was thinking was that nothing had ever felt quite so right, so simple and natural, as those few moments she had been in Logan's arms.

YOU'RE BEING crazy, Cassie. A kiss, for goodness' sake. Cassie was a fairly enlightened woman. She knew there was nothing mystical about sexual attraction, and she was honest enough to admit to herself that she had felt nothing but attraction for Logan since the moment she had first seen him. She had always had a healthy physical relationship with Greg—sex was one of the few things about which they did not fight—and she had been alone for almost a year. There were a lot of very logical and obvious reasons for her present vulnerability, and for being very careful. Cassie knew all this, but

that did not stop her pulse from speeding or her skin from flushing when he walked into the room. She felt like a girl with her first crush, because it did feel special to her. And she did not think it was going to go away.

"Your aunt didn't get enough sleep last night to count," Logan was saying to Amy, "so how about pitching in and lending an extra hand today?"

"What about you?" Cassie slid a stack of pancakes onto his tray. "You didn't sleep at all."

He shrugged. "I'm used to it." His attitude was natural and relaxed. He flipped the lever on the coffee urn and lifted an eyebrow at the thick black brew. "The coffee looks good," he commented, and then took his tray and went over to a table.

That was all. Cassie didn't even have time to feel disappointment or to tell herself there was no reason to be disappointed. The breakfast rush had begun.

The men were much less subdued than they had been yesterday, and the talk was all of Red. They filed in out of the dark into the warm, fragrant mess tent, and scraps of conversation reached Cassie.

"I could see it coming, just as plain as day."

"Tried to tell him there was trouble on the way."

"Did anybody hear how many there were?"

"Well, you're welcome to them. You'll never catch me going up against a bunch of rustlers."

It was the word "rustler" that finally filtered through to Cassie. She paused in the process of transferring a stack of pancakes onto the tray of the man before her.

He was large—"fat" even—with greasy dark hair and tobacco-stained lips. She had heard the men call him



Bill. She said, "Pardon me, but did you say 'rustlers'?"

"Yes'm. And no offense, but the boss, that is, Red, he knew how we felt about it from the start. We'll ride your herd, but we don't aim to get ourselves hurt doing it. There's just no percentage in it."

Cassie said nothing, just filled his tray.

Amy was practically dancing with excitement beside her. "Did he say rustlers? Come on, Cassie, he had to be putting you on! That's—"

Cassie thrust the spatula into Amy's hand. "Finish up for me, will you?" she said abruptly and, tugging off her apron, she pushed aside the tent flap and stepped outside.

Dawn was just beginning to wash over the sky, pale and gray-blue. The grass was damp with dew, and the breakfast smells mingled with the scent of hardwood and mountain herbs in a subtly intoxicating aroma.

Logan was over by the horses. She said, without looking at him, "You knew." Her voice was low and tight with anger.

Logan answered simply, "Yes."

She watched him as he untied his horse, giving it an absent pat on the flank before bending to lift his saddle. He worked with swift, efficient movements. And then he said, without turning, "I don't get involved in things that are none of my business, Cassie. I figured that if your brother had wanted you to know about the trouble we were having, he would have told you. When Red asked me to keep quiet, I did."

For a moment, confusion overcame everything else. "Red asked you not to tell me? Why?"

He turned to face her, holding the reins loosely in his hand. "There was nothing you could do," he explained

simply. "I guess he thought he was protecting you."

"But when I asked you," she insisted, a little shakily, "you should have told me. We could have gone to the sheriff last night—"

"I don't think so." He turned and mounted.

Cassie stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"For one thing," he said, turning his horse to face her, "I don't talk to sheriffs. For another, I don't think you would have liked what I would have told him."

"What?" Her voice sounded hoarse. "What would you have told him?"

He looked down at her for a moment, measuringly. "The men who came up on Red from behind last night," he said simply, "were riding Circle P horses."

Cassie looked at him blankly, her mind struggling to assimilate what he said and reeling with a dozen unanswered questions.

He lifted the reins and started to go, and then he turned back. The horse was restless, but Logan held him in check. He looked down at Cassie soberly.

"One more thing," he said quietly. "When I kissed you last night, it wasn't a game. I'm not that sophisticated."

He gave his horse a nudge and the animal turned instantly. They broke into a gentle gallop, and Cassie stood there until the sound of hoofbeats faded away.

JONAS ARRIVED just as they were making camp that afternoon. They were driving stakes for the mess tent when the sound of the Jeep reached them, and although Cassie's enthusiasm did

not quite match Amy's, she was aware of a swift and shameful sweep of relief. Jonas was here. Let him handle things from now on.

Amy threw herself into his arms, and he lifted her off her feet. Watching them, Cassie felt a small stab of jealousy—not for Jonas, but for Amy and Jonas, who had each other.

Jonas set Amy down, and Cassie could see him trying to make his expression stern as he spoke to her. Cassie couldn't hear the words, but she could imagine the lecture. And her turn would be next.

Rodney glanced at her. "I guess you and Mr. Parkington have some things to talk about. I'll finish setting up the tent."

"Thanks, Rodney. I'll be back to help as soon as I can."

Amy did not seem to be taking her father's reprimand in the spirit it was meant. "No, it was great fun, honestly," Cassie could hear her lie as they approached. "And really, Daddy, you wouldn't believe how educational it's been."

Jonas glanced at Cassie.

"Hello, Jonas," she greeted him brightly. "Have a nice trip?"

"Fair," he responded, and gave Amy's pigtail a tug, saying, "Well, I don't want to deprive you of your 'educational' experience for another moment. Why don't you go on with what you were doing and let me talk to your aunt?"

"Don't go away," Amy called back to her father as she started off. "You wouldn't believe all the things I have to tell you!"

Oh, yes, thought Cassie heavily. But she was surprised by the note of amusement in his voice as he drawled, "Well, well. So it's the same old Cassie after all. I was worried about you for awhile there, you know."

"Do you mean you're not mad?"

"Of course I'm mad. I'm mad as hell. But at least you're behaving consistently. It wouldn't have occurred to you to simply wait for me to return your call and solve the problem over the phone. What if there had been some emergency back at the house?" he demanded. "What if I had needed to reach you from California, or what if Amy's mother had shown up and found out what her daughter was up to? Did you ever think of that? For God's sake, Cassie, won't you ever grow up?"

Cassie was genuinely chagrined. In fact, she hadn't thought of any of those things. But she met his eyes bravely. "I am sorry, Jonas," she said.

"You should be," he answered with satisfaction.

"But," she continued intrepidly, "I couldn't think of anything else to do, and—"

"And, as it happens," he interrupted mildly, "it seems to have turned out fine. I hear you've done a good job."

She stared at him, robbed unfairly of her defenses and justifications by the mischievous spark in his eyes.

"But don't you ever do anything like this again...and certainly not with my daughter. You were lucky this time, that's all. What would have happened," he demanded sternly, "if you had forgotten how to cook?"

Cassie grinned at him. "Then, instead of congratulating me, you'd probably be cutting me down from the highest tree right now." But her humor, and her relief, were short-lived. "It hasn't all been a bed of roses, Jonas," she confessed. "Last night—"

"I know. I talked to Logan on the way up."

She paused, her face reflecting her surprise. "Well, I hope he told you more than he told me."

Jonas's expression was sober, but not unduly concerned. "We have unaccounted-for losses every roundup," he said. "I've always suspected rustlers, but it was Logan who gave me the proof I needed."

"What is he?" Cassie demanded. "An undercover cop?"

Jonas smiled a little. "I know, he doesn't talk much. But he's a good man, and he knows what he's doing."

Cassie released a breath of relief. Obviously, he approved of her decision in giving Logan Red's job. And she was spared the necessity of telling him about the rustlers and Red's injury.

"So you've known about the rustlers," she said. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why should I?"

"Because this ranch is half mine," she said. "What is this—some kind of male conspiracy?"

Jonas looked guilty. "It's pretty much still a man's world out here, Cassie," he confessed. "Red is used to reporting to no one but me, and I... Well, hell, Cassie. Who knows how long you're going to stay? I've been running this ranch for almost twenty years, as well as everything else, but for you it's just something to keep you entertained. I didn't see any reason for you to get involved."

That hurt, mostly because it was true. She had only been amusing herself these past months, pretending to be useful to Jonas. As a child she had been flighty; as a married woman she had been pampered and self-indulgent; and, since her divorce, she had been restless and unsettled. Of course he would think her interest in the ranch was just another passing fancy.

"So, you've just been humoring me," she said.

He sighed. "Cassie, don't be hurt. You know you have a home with me as long as you want, but—"

She stopped and looked at him. "I don't want a home with you," she said sharply. "I want *my* home. And this is just as much mine as it is yours."

She took a breath and added, more gently, "This is not a game to me, Jonas. I didn't come here for a rest stop. I *am* involved, and I'm committed to our partnership. I'm staying." The strange thing was that, until she said it, she had not even realized how true that was. She had come back here seeking her self, and she had found it. She had come to the realization last night when she had watched the sun set over the mountains with Logan.

Jonas looked at her, a slow acceptance dawning in his eyes. He said softly, "You really mean that, don't you?"

She nodded.

But instead of the pleasure she had expected to see, a faint scowl crept across Jonas's handsome features. And then he seemed to think better of it. "Well, welcome home, partner," he said. "I guess we have a lot to talk about when we get back to the house. By the way, I found you another cook," he continued as they approached the camp. "But he won't be able to come out for two days." His eyebrows knit a little in concern. "I could find a temporary, I guess. I don't really want to ask you to stay..."

"I'll stay," Cassie said firmly, and was surprised both at the quickness of the decision and at the relief in realizing she did not have to go home with Jonas today.

She must be crazy. This was awful, grueling work. She needed a bath, and she was desperately in need of sleep—

the cold, hard ground offered no appeal. The crew resented her, and there were thieves in the night who had already put one man in the hospital. And there was Logan . . .

Jonas was looking at her peculiarly, and she shrugged and tossed him a grin. "I'm a partner, remember? It's about time I started pulling my weight."

He chuckled and together they walked back into camp.

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THE AFTERNOON meal was much more relaxed than it had been yesterday, partly due to the presence of Jonas. He had a way of putting everyone at ease, and the men liked him. The cheerful atmosphere might also have had something to do with the fact that the crew knew his arrival meant the imminent departure of the two women who had so infringed upon their life-style.

"I don't believe it," Amy was saying, and she turned to Cassie. "Daddy's teasing me, isn't he?"

Cassie looked at her in confusion. She, Jonas, Amy and Rodney were sitting at the end of the communal table, and Cassie hadn't been following the conversation at all. From farther down the table another man spoke up.

"Lord, miss, your daddy didn't make up that story. Maybe *his* daddy did, or his daddy before him!"

There was a burst of laughter, and someone else added, "People have been looking for that gold since the first wagons crossed the Oregon Trail!"

Cassie answered then. "Oh, you mean Gallagher's gold. Yes, it's supposed to be around here somewhere. Although I never believed it!"

"George Gallagher," explained Jonas, enjoying Amy's skepticism, "crossed these mountains with a pack train of Spanish gold back in 1840 or so. Seems the American government had made some kind of deal with the Spanish, and Gallagher's job was to see the gold safely back to the States.

"Well, they were not too far from where we are right now, when they noticed they were being stalked by Indians. Gallagher cached that gold and found himself a place to make a stand, but his party was completely wiped out—horses, mules, men. All except Gallagher himself, who hid underwater, breathing through a cattail, until the Indians had gone.

"Some even say—" he added a touch of drama—"that Gallagher killed the last survivors of his own party, so that they wouldn't be able to come back for the gold before he did. You see, he couldn't get the gold out of the valley without help, or without pack animals.

"So he had to leave the gold behind while he went for help. He told the men he hired the general vicinity of the gold, but not the exact location. And on his way back for it, he died—rattlesnake bite, I think—without ever telling anybody where the gold was, and here it supposedly lies to this day."

Amy's eyes were wide. "On our land?"

Jonas scooped up more beans. "It wasn't ours back then."

"You're making it up," Amy said at last.

"No, he's not." Rodney had been tautly silent throughout. Now he met Amy's eyes defiantly. "It's a true story. My mother's maiden name was Gallagher," he said proudly. "George Gallagher was her grandfather."

AMY AND JONAS left the next morning, and the relief with which Amy anticipated the end of her adventure made Cassie smile in weary self-congratulation. She had made her point.

Throughout that long day she busied herself with preparing vegetables for the evening meal, filling out the supply requisitions, scrubbing the inside of the wagon and getting everything shipshape for the arrival of the new cook the next day. She pretended to carry on conversations with Rodney—who, now that Amy was gone, had become very talkative. But not once during the entire day was Logan off her mind.

He tipped his hat to her as he came through the chow line, a polite gesture that most of the other men performed by habit. She was a woman and the boss; some respect was due. There was nothing more to Logan's attitude than that, except when she smiled at him, a little distantly, a little stiffly, and she thought she saw a flicker of something strange in his eyes—uncertainty, perhaps, or regret.

Cassie ate outside alone that evening. Being the only woman in the tent made her as uncomfortable as it made everyone else. The supply truck was due the next day, and she had scraped the bottom of the barrel for that night's meal. The meatball stew was original, and the side dish of beans was well seasoned with onions and garlic, but nothing had much taste to Cassie. She sat on a camp chair beneath a fragrant spruce and picked at her food.

"It's a shame to waste all that food. It's pretty good tonight."

It was Logan's voice, and Cassie's heart lurched before determinedly resuming its normal rhythm. He had come upon her from behind, and she had not even heard him. Logan had

the natural stealth of a wild animal on the prowl.

"I'm getting a little tired of picking the sand out of my food, I guess," she replied, as she set her plate aside and looked up at him.

He handed her a small black book. "The tally up until today," he explained. "Your brother said you kept the records. You'll want to transcribe this into your ledger."

Cassie took it from him. "It sounds like you know a little more about ranching than the average laborer."

That opaque screen came over his eyes again, the withdrawal she had learned to expect. Only this time it did not last. He lit a cigarette, and said, "I grew up on a small spread. In Texas."

The significance of that statement was not lost on Cassie. For the first time he had shared something of his past and his identity with her. He had done it willingly, and it marked the tenuous beginning of a change between them.

She smiled up at him gently, a little shyly. "Was that so hard?" she asked.

He shook his head a little. "More than you know."

He dropped down beside her then, sitting back on his heels. For a moment he was silent, then he said, "I don't deliberately try to be mysterious, Cassie. It's just that sometimes looking back is not a happy thing. It's even harder when you can't ever go back."

*What would you go back to, Logan?* she wondered. *And would someone be waiting for you there?*

She said, "None of us can go back. Not really." Then she asked gently, "Doesn't it ever get lonely for you, Logan?"

"I suppose." He did not look at her. "I never got into the habit of opening up to people and never missed closing

them out . . . until now." And then he looked at her. He said nothing more, but the quiet simplicity of all that was unsaid left Cassie poised on the brink of hope.

And then he said softly, "Damn. I swore I wasn't going to do this."

"Do what?" Cassie's voice was placid, if a little breathless. She did not want him to leave.

"Sit here with you, alone like this, and listen to you." He shook his head slowly, gazing off again into the distance. "You have the prettiest voice," he murmured. "Like the wind across a faraway mountain. And when I listen to you . . . it makes me wish I could be different."

"You don't want to be different," she assured him. "I know what it's like to change for someone . . . or to be changed. I wouldn't wish it on anybody."

He turned his eyes back on her again. And then he smiled softly and said, "You are a lovely lady, Cassie Grant. I hope you find somebody who deserves you."

*I already have*, Cassie thought. But she did not say it. She would never say it.

And then Logan switched the mood to business again. "We lost a few more head yesterday. I thought maybe they'd let up with all the fuss over Red, but no such luck."

Cassie frowned. "I don't understand. A few head here, another few there . . . They can't possibly sell them for full price. Why would anyone go to all that trouble?"

He shrugged. "Well, it may not seem like much to you, but one cow can be sold even at cut-rate for more than a cowboy makes in a week. If he gets two a day he's doubled his month's wages. Keep it small, and the chances are nobody will notice. If I

were to go into rustling, that's the way I would do it."

"But we know what's going on," she insisted. "How can they keep getting away with it?"

"Easiest thing in the world. The men are pretty spread out when they're riding herd. They go off for hours at a time to chase a loose steer, and nobody keeps tabs."

"So you think it's some of our men."

He nodded. "It has to be. As long as they're cutting the herd during the day, or on night watch when nobody notices, there's not much chance of catching them. Though Red must've come pretty close the other night."

"Well, that's just fine." Her voice was short with anger. "People in our very camp are making off with our cattle. Just as soon as I get to a phone, I'm having the sheriff out here—"

He chuckled softly. "Honey..." The word rolled out naturally. "That won't do anything but make them laugh. The law is good for subpoenas and traffic accidents, but it doesn't know anything about the country out here, as your brother found out when he first reported our trouble. The best thing we can do is lie low and hope they get greedy."

Cassie looked at him curiously. "What do you mean?"

"We've got a couple of hundred head corralled at the line camp, all fat and sassy and just waiting to be shipped out. Nobody patrols the stock pens, and it's an awful temptation. I'm thinking it might not hurt if I slept in the line shack for the next couple of nights. The worst it can do is discourage them from taking any of the stock I worked so hard to tag." He got lazily to his feet. "That's all I wanted to tell you. I'll be away from camp for

awhile, and I didn't want you thinking I'd run off with your horses."

Cassie's throat jerked suddenly and she had to swallow. So, this was it. They had met, touched briefly, and now they were parting. She would probably never see him again.

She said, trying to keep her voice matter-of-fact, "The new cook arrives tomorrow. I'll be going home."

The sun was in his eyes, narrowing them to crystalline slits. He adjusted his hat to shade his face, but nothing was readable in his expression. "I'll miss your cooking," he said. "It's been nice, having a woman's touch around the camp."

She tried very hard to keep her voice as casual as his. "I don't guess I'll see you again."

"Probably not," he agreed. "I don't get down to the house much."

She managed a smile. "Well, this is goodbye, then."

Still his face was impossible to read. He answered simply, "I guess it is."

She couldn't let it hang between them like that. She had to say, softly, "I'm glad I met you, Logan."

He stood there, looking down at her for a long moment. And then he turned casually and walked away.

THE NEW COOK arrived early the next afternoon on the supply truck. His name was Wilson, and he was a short, genial man with a bald pink head and a tuft of white whiskers that looked like bleached corn silk on his chin.

The driver of the truck offered to take Cassie back to the ranch, but he seemed to be in a hurry, and she did not feel right about deserting the new cook as soon as he arrived. There would be plenty of time before dark to drive back to the house.

Fortunately, Wilson was an easygoing man and didn't mind her advice or interference. "Of course," Cassie broke off apologetically after a full five minutes of directions on the best way to arrange the supplies in the wagon, "everyone likes to keep his kitchen his own way."

"Same with a chuck wagon, miss," he replied complacently and moved a box of canned peaches. "As long as you're of a mind to help, though..." He paused and looked around. "You might tell me what you did with the milk. Make a fine potato soup, really sticks to the ribs, but it ain't nothing without canned milk."

Cassie moved a few boxes. "I don't remember unloading any, do you?"

He shook his head.

Cassie frowned. "It's a standing order. We must have left it in the back of the truck."

Cassie stood there for a moment thinking. The truck had pulled out less than five minutes ago, and she could easily overtake it if she went by horseback.

"Listen," she said, "I'm going to try to catch up with the truck. If I can't, I'll send someone out with the milk tomorrow."

Cassie hadn't ridden in this part of the country in many years, but the landmarks were familiar to her and she had no fear of getting lost. The road the truck would have taken led east, and she set off at a mild canter. There was no reason to hurry, for until the truck reached the paved road it would be going at a much slower pace than she was.

She did enjoy riding horseback, all alone in the midst of the vast plains and hills. It allowed her to imagine what it must have been like when the first white men came across all those years ago...



It was a stupid accident, and if she had not been riding with a slack rein, daydreaming and enjoying the view, it probably never would have happened. She was walking her horse down a small incline when the loose rocky ground gave way. Her mount slipped on the rolling stones and soil, lost its footing and stumbled.

There was a moment of sheer panic as Cassie felt the horse start to go down. All she could think to do was kick free of the stirrups and leap for safety.

She hit the ground hard and rolled over and over in the dust and stones, down the hill. Her eyes and mouth filled with dirt, and her hands were torn by briars and rocks as she tried to catch herself. When at last she came to a stop, she could only lie there, dazed and gasping, wondering how badly she was hurt.

Her eyes were streaming from the sand they had collected, and it was a long time before she could see. She wiped her eyes and her mouth on her sleeve and stood up a little shakily. Her hip hurt from the collision with the ground, but otherwise her limbs seemed to be in working order. She hadn't been thrown from a horse since she was thirteen, and then it had been a high-spirited stallion that her father had bought for show—not one of these stolid little cow ponies.

Irritation with the clumsiness of her mount made her forget her own woes and discomforts and look around sharply for the horse. She had tumbled about ten feet down the hill—it had only seemed farther—and her horse had recovered itself much more quickly than she had. Even as she looked, he was trotting off in the opposite direction, already about fifty yards away and not slowing down. The fall had spooked him, and there was no

way Cassie could catch him even if she ran. Still, she did run, calling out, but the horse disappeared behind a dip in the earth and was gone.

"Damn!" she cried angrily and stuffed her hands in her pockets. She did not know how far she had come from the camp, only that she was closer to it than to the road. Not that reaching the road would do her much good now. Dispiritedly, she began to trudge back in the direction from which she had come.

She had been walking for about fifteen minutes when she realized she was no longer certain from which direction she had come. The spill had disoriented her, and although she was moving west, toward the sun, a lot of things lay that way besides the campsite. Nothing looked familiar to her.

It was very hot out there in the middle of nowhere, unprotected from the afternoon sun. Cassie pushed her sticky hair away from her face and was at first horrified, then dismayed, when her hand came away smeared with blood. She had obviously scraped her forehead, but her head didn't hurt any worse than the rest of her body, so she could only assume the injury wasn't serious.

Cassie took a deep, fortifying breath, and focused on what her next move should be. She couldn't be that far from the camp—three or four miles at most—and while that wasn't exactly a pleasant jaunt in this heat, it was not impossible. Assuming she could get her bearings, she was certain she would come upon some signs of habitation before long. After all, there were twenty men and several hundred head of cattle scattered throughout the countryside; she couldn't stay lost forever.

But out here, "lost" was a relative term. Clouds were beginning to pile up

on the western horizon like snowdrifts, and Cassie swore softly. Two weeks without a drop and she was about to be caught in a rainstorm—or more likely, a thunderstorm. Lightning in the mountains was nothing to joke about, and now she really began to get scared.

The correct direction was optional now; her primary concern was to find shelter. She knew, of course, that in open country and clear air all objects looked closer than they actually were. But too many years of city living had dulled her perception, and she had forgotten how treacherous this countryside could be. She set her sights on a small stand of pine near a cliff overhang, but after she had been walking an hour her goal seemed no closer than before. At that point then she had to admit that she was really lost.

Moving toward the pine trees kept her going west—at least she hadn't been stupid enough to turn around and go in the opposite direction—and she reached the tumble of broken rocks that heralded her three scraggly pine trees just as the first fat drops of rain began to fall. She looked around for shelter before her clothes were completely soaked. What she found was an alcove beneath an overhanging boulder. It was deep enough to protect her from the blowing rain and wide enough to allow her to sit comfortably. She used a pine bough to sweep the interior of the narrow cave, and when nothing crawled out, she felt it was safe to sit down.

She settled herself into the shelter just in time. The full force of the rain came with a fury, spraying Cassie's face even as she huddled far back beneath the rock. It was brief, but it was violent. The sound of it thundered against the rock and swept around her

like an ocean, drowning out even the sound of her own breathing.

Like most mountain storms, it passed quickly, leaving only a steady patter of rain that curtained the rock and was soothing in its steady, rhythmic sound. Thunder rolled in the distance but did not threaten. Cassie straightened up.

The worst was not over by any means, but she felt strengthened and renewed, even though she was still lost.

It was gloomy under the rock, and when she squinted at her watch she was surprised to see it was only four o'clock. She felt as though she had been out here forever.

Four o'clock. The men would be coming in, sitting down to the evening meal with the new cook. Surely someone would miss her by now. Or would they? She tried to remember exactly what she had told Wilson. Would he think she had missed the supply truck and had decided to go on home without saying goodbye?

It began to occur to her that she could be stranded out here overnight, a notion that made her shudder. Even during the daytime this was no place for a woman alone. If she were found, she might wish she hadn't been. She had to find her way back to camp. Somehow.

The rain had slowed to a light drizzle, and she couldn't stay here forever. Grimacing a little, she stretched her muscles and started to crawl out. Then she froze. The sound she heard was slow and stealthy. Rocks scattered; mud squished. Footsteps. They were coming straight toward her.

Cassie held her breath, instinctively shrinking back, and then she heard the voice. "Cassie?"

Relief flooded through her in a wave so intense it made her weak. "Logan!"

She scrambled out of the enclosure, and he bent down to help her up. His grip was rough, and his fingers, closing around her upper arms, were painful. But she didn't care. He was here. Like a happy ending to a bad dream.

She stood there in the misty rain, wanting to fling her arms around him but paralyzed by happiness and relief. He was wearing a dark slicker, and his hat, dark and wet, was pulled low, shadowing his face. When her deliriously spinning vision cleared, her relief faltered. He did not look very happy.

"What happened?" he demanded flatly.

"My—my horse stumbled," she explained. "I had to kick free and I fell. The horse ran away and..." She tried to smile. "How—how did you find me?"

"I spotted your horse," he replied tersely. "I've got him tied up back at the line shack. Come on."

His horse stood steaming in the rapidly fading drizzle, and when she lifted her foot to the stirrup, he grasped her waist and deposited her bodily in the saddle, hard. Then he swung up behind her, and when she lifted the reins he took them from her, not speaking, and guided the horse into a turn.

His wet poncho dripped over her mostly dry jeans, and his pelvis was hard and heated against her backside, but there was nothing intimate about their position. He avoided touching her voluntarily, resting one arm on the back of the saddle while he held the reins away from her body with the other. Tension and anger radiated from him and he did not say a word.

At first Cassie was angry, too. He was acting as though she were a troublesome child.

And then she saw the direction in which he was riding, and she did feel like a troublesome child.

The line camp was not a quarter of a mile, cross-country, from where she had taken her spill. She had been wandering through the countryside, narrowly skirting the very signs of civilization that she sought, for hours. She had never been in a life-and-death situation at all. If only she had followed her horse.

Logan slid out of the saddle, and Cassie dismounted from the other side, refusing his help. He gestured her toward the cabin. "Come inside." His tone was quiet. "Let's see to those cuts."

The cabin was a small, efficient one-room affair with a wood-burning stove, a small table and a narrow cot. A Coleman lantern hung on the wall, and a small butane-burning cookstove was stashed in one corner. The only window was covered with cloudy polyurethane. The interior was gloomy and uninviting, and when Logan closed the door, the major source of light was cut off.

A little stiffly, Cassie made her way over to the cot and sat down. It was made with a wool army blanket and hospital corners so neat that she felt guilty for disturbing it, and she sat on the very edge. She said tightly, "Look, I'm not really hurt. There's no need..."

He replied tersely, "You've got blood all over your face."

He opened his canteen and sloshed water onto his handkerchief before coming over to her. He sat down beside her and applied the damp cloth to her face with a touch that was startlingly gentle, sponging away the grime and the blood. Cassie felt a stab of chagrin. Then she noticed that his hand was shaking.

Her eyes met his in question, and he could not hide the pain that crossed his face. "Damn it, Cassie," he burst out. "What the hell were you doing out there?"

Cassie retreated from this uncharacteristic display of emotions she did not understand. "Listen," she said tightly, "I feel stupid enough as it is. You don't have to—"

"Stupid!" He stood abruptly, turning away from her. "Is that what you think it is? That's not the word for it, lady!"

Cassie got to her feet, fighting back the sudden irritational sting of tears in her eyes. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry you had to come out in the rain and I'm sorry I got lost. I know my way back to camp from here, so I'll just get out of your way."

She started for the door, but his hand was hard on her arm, whirling her around. She jerked away and he released her. They stood facing each other, his eyes blazing, her breath coming in quick, furious bursts.

Then, as he looked at her, the anger faded, slowly and painfully. She saw his face tighten against a new and more difficult emotion, and his eyes softened as they went over her face—softened and filled with pain. He lifted his hand, and Cassie thought he would take her into his arms. But all he did was touch her hair, very lightly. His eyes lowered, and he said, a little huskily, "Sit down. Please. You need some first aid."

She let him guide her back to the bed, and she sat very still as he lifted the cloth to her face again. But almost immediately he dropped his hand and turned away. "I can't do it," he admitted softly. "Look at my hands." They were trembling noticeably. "I saw a man get his arm caught in a thresher

once," he said. "I've pulled people out of automobile wrecks. I never—"

He took a breath and dragged his cupped hand over his chin. He did not look at her. "When I saw your horse and I thought about you out there, maybe hurt, maybe..." He took another breath. "Something went through me... I'm not used to being scared for anyone but myself. I've never known the feeling before. I don't want to know it again. All I could think about was what the world would be like without you in it."

He caught his breath sharply, got up and walked over to the table. "I'm not used to being responsible for other people... or wanting to be. I never guessed, until today, that with you, I didn't have a choice."

She had known she didn't have a choice since the first day she met him. Cassie strained toward him, her breath, her muscles, her very soul aching to enfold him. But she didn't move.

After what seemed like a long time, his hardened muscles began to relax; she could hear his soft expulsion of breath. Then he opened his saddlebag and removed a compact first-aid kit.

She finished wiping her face and hands, and he opened a bottle of antiseptic. His hands were steadier now, and she tried not to wince as he dabbed the wound on her forehead. His tone was mild as he told her, "It's not very deep. It just looked bad."

"It hardly hurts at all," she answered.

The intensity of moments just passed still echoed between them, making their words and their movements seem self-conscious. Each of them was holding needs and emotions tightly in check.

He placed a bandage over the small cut on her head and turned his attention to her hands. It was his nearness

that was causing Cassie's stomach to tense and her muscles to stiffen, she realized.

She pulled her hands away in a silly, nervous gesture. "It's all right," she said. "There's not much you can do about scraped palms."

He looked at her hesitantly, and that only made Cassie feel more ill at ease. Their eyes met, and there was no hiding in that moment what was in her heart, in her mind. Yet distantly, as if from far away, Cassie thought, *We're not going to do this. We're not going to make love in this cozy, isolated place simply because we're both scared and there's nothing to stop us.*

And in the same instant, he seemed to know and agree. His eyes now lightened into a smile and he inquired, "Any more injuries that I can't see?"

Cassie laughed, a nervous, strained sound that was almost convincing. "None that you can treat." She gingerly touched the bruise on her hip.

He got up to replace the first-aid kit. With his back to her, he asked casually, "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Cassie shrugged. "There's not much more to tell. I made a stupid mistake and lost my horse. I thought I could walk back to camp, but I misjudged the distance. Then I saw the storm coming and I tried to find shelter. I got lost. End of story." She looked up at him. "Do the people at camp know that I'm missing?"

"I doubt it. I haven't seen any sign of movement from that direction." He unscrewed the cap of a metal flask. "Guess what else I've got?" he said, and the aroma of whiskey drifted over to her as he poured a measure into a tin cup. Cassie lifted an eyebrow.

"Drinking on the job, Mr. Logan?"

He found a dusty glass and filled it, turning to her with a grin. "It's good for snakebite," he assured her. He handed her the cup and sat again on the bed—not as close this time. "I'll ride back with you in a minute," he said, sipping from the glass. "My horse needs a rest, and so do you."

Cassie glanced down into the cup. She didn't care for whiskey much. "How did you know it was my horse?" she asked.

"I could tell by the length of the stirrups. I knew it was you." And his eyes darkened as he added, "I figured you for a pretty good rider and knew something drastic must have happened." She could see the muscles of his face tighten but his voice was very calm. "Fortunately, I caught sight of your footprints before the rain washed them away. You must have been wandering around out there for a very long time."

Now Cassie did take a sip of whiskey. It was bitter and unpleasant, but it warmed her. "Well, it wasn't exactly a transcendent experience, I'll tell you that."

Logan looked at her curiously. "Did you mean for it to be?"

The faint smile Cassie had mustered faded as she gazed into the cup. "No. I don't know. I think..." And she shrugged. "I think since I came back I've been looking at the ranch as some kind of road to self-awareness. Maybe I thought by recapturing my past I could come to terms with who I am, or be a better person. I found out today that I'm basically no different than I was when I arrived. I got lost in the wilderness on my own ranch, for heaven's sake, within shouting distance of where I am right now. But God, I was so scared," she whispered. "It was so empty...and I was so alone." She raised eyes to him that

were wide and filled with naked emotion. "Oh, Logan, how do you stand it?"

She was not referring to the nature of the work he did, but to the utter aloneness that Cassie had only begun to taste—which to him was a way of life.

He answered simply but honestly, "I never thought about it much. It gets to be a habit, being alone, but I guess somewhere in the back of my mind it's always bothered me a little that I could disappear off the face of the earth and no one would notice, or be there to mark my passing. But I've been doing it for so long I can hardly imagine any other way. There's a kind of hardness, I guess, that grows in a man who's lived alone for so long, and after a while you don't even think about it."

Cassie took another drink of whiskey, winced, and half laughed. She set the cup on the floor. "That stuff is making my head spin."

He smiled and toasted her. "Small wonder. At three ninety-eight a bottle, it's probably fifty-percent rubbing alcohol." He drained his own glass and deposited it on the windowsill. He looked easy and relaxed now, not anxious to leave at all. Cassie was glad. She wanted to stay here and just be with him for a little while longer.

"You're easy to talk to," she said softly. "I feel as though I've known you for a long time." He was familiar to her, comforting, secure. As though some part of them had touched long ago. As though they belonged together.

He simply looked at her, and understanding passed gently between them. It was true. They both knew it.

He leaned back, smiling at her almost sadly. "Ah, Cassie," he said softly. "Look at us. We're two of a kind, aren't we? You're trying to es-

cape into your past, I'm trying to escape from mine. . . . And we've ended up in a time bubble in the middle of nowhere, where we can pretend to be anything we want. We wouldn't survive a minute in the real world." It was a warning, but it was also a question. The truth was: *We don't have a chance together.* The question was: *Does it matter?*

Her heart was pounding. She shifted her weight, leaning toward him. She could sense his breath stop, and his eyes quickened. But he made no move to stop her. He simply waited as she lifted her hand and touched his face.

Slowly he turned his lips to the pressure of her palm. Tiny tremors of need—of love—whispered through her. And at the same moment his hand came up and closed lightly around her wrist. "Don't," he whispered. "It makes no sense." His muscles tensed, a forceful restraint against crushing her close. "You can't get involved with me. Involvement means questions that I can't answer, needs I can't fill, promises I can't make. . . ."

"It's too late," she whispered. "I'm already involved with you."

He shifted against her; releasing her hand, he took her chin and lifted her face to his. He looked down at her, and his eyes were dark and intense, filled with such raw emotion and torn desires that it hurt her eyes just to look at him. "God help me," he whispered brokenly, "because I'm involved with you, too. And there doesn't seem to be anything I can do about it."

His mouth claimed hers, not greedily or violently, but with a slow breaking of barriers, a raw and helpless need. It was a moment of surrender for both of them, as painful as it was sweet. They explored each other and they gave to each other, and when he moved his mouth to her neck, to taste



her ear and her temple and her cheek, Cassie could only cling to him, awash with trembling awareness and weak with fiery need.

"Ah, Cassie," he whispered, "I do want to make love to you. That's all I can give you now."

"Then that's all I want," she whispered, and tightened her arms around him, pressing her face to the thud of his heart, absorbing his strength and his heat, loving him, holding him. He could not be a part of her life, but if the moment was all they were offered, the moment was all they could take. It was enough. It would have to be.

He undressed before her in the dying light of day, standing beside the bed, never removing his eyes from her. It occurred to Cassie that no man had ever undressed before she did, and it seemed to her a unique display of trust. But everything about Logan, and his lovemaking, was unique. Her hands were hot and heavy as she tugged off her boots, her fingers clumsy as they fumbled with the buttons of her shirt. But Logan undressed gracefully, unmindful of her eyes upon him as his body was revealed . . . strong and lean and natural in its arousal; all sinewy arms and broad chest, long legs and flat abdomen, smooth planes and dark shadings of hair.

He knelt on the bed beside her and helped her remove the last of her clothes. Naked, Cassie was enfolded in his hard length, awash in his heat, stirred by his breath. And for the longest time he simply held her like that, letting his body tell her of itself and absorbing the shy secrets of her own. Closing her eyes against the mist of wondering tears, Cassie tightened her arms around him, shakily inhaling the rich and subtle masculine scent of him, and she thought that she had never known a more beautiful mo-

ment than this. Surely even their actual coming together could not be more eloquent, more moving, than the sensation of being wrapped in simple warmth and quiet adoration, his flesh against hers, held in her lover's arms.

He kissed her with fervent emotional intensity, and each kiss, tender upon her lips, luxurious upon her breasts, deep and drawing against the center of her abdomen, opened up something new and vital within Cassie, and revealed something deep and unashamed in him. He touched her with gentle exploratory fingers; he stroked her body with sensual awareness of the texture of her skin, the curves and planes. He took pleasure in the discovery; there was adoration in his eyes and a hazy flush of wonder on his face. Cassie was filled with exquisite joy just knowing that for all the soaring pleasure his caresses gave her, they gave him even more.

Cassie didn't need coaching to take her own pleasure from him. Logan was hers, there were no secrets from him, and their familiarity only began with the physical. He did not have to urge her hand to the place he most wanted her to touch; she was eager to explore this most intimate part of his body, to caress his heated length, to know the familiarity that came with loving.

There was an unspoken harmony to their movements, their touches, their needs. Physical arousal was intense and aching, but the emotional need was even more powerful. When Cassie could not bear to be separate from him a moment longer, he moved over her. Without hesitation, in a motion as sweet and natural as the forces that compelled them together, he slid into her.

Cassie gasped against the sensation, the strangeness of his full length invading her, filling her, and the instinc-



tive, unexpected power of her own body's reaction. There was heat deep inside her, building and burning where he was; there was also a tightening anxiety, and an urgent, urgent need. She had never known it could be like this, physical sensations so intense they were blinding, emotional needs so all-encompassing they were transporting. From that moment on, the world ceased to exist except as it contained the two of them.

His arms slipped beneath her, gathering her close, holding her as he kissed her gently. Her eyes opened and she saw in his dark, slumberous gaze the extent of all she was feeling, words she wanted to say, emotions she needed to express. There were no secrets in his eyes. And looking into them, she saw all she ever wanted to know.

Only when the pleasure, the wonder, of their initial joining had built to an unbearable level did he begin to move inside her. Still, they moved, they touched, they breathed as one. They gave to each other and they took from each other, and giving and taking, too, became as one. In those suspended moments of an ending day a bond neither of them had chosen and neither of them understood was forged, and if lives were not changed, souls were.

Afterward, for a long time he stayed inside her and she held him there. She felt the thundering of her heart and the unsteady rush of her own breath; she tasted the salt of his perspiration and the sweetness of his kiss. They held each other, quietly, helplessly, while awareness slowly filtered down into reality. And then, moving away from her, Logan shifted his weight and drew her head gently onto his shoulder.

Cassie lay there, her hand curled lightly against the damp hair on his chest, her cheek against the hard pad of his shoulder. She could see her fin-

gers rise and fall with the pulse of his heart. His arm did not encircle her, but his hand barely brushed her shoulder. Full dusk had fallen, and he was not holding her anymore.

*I don't think I can do it, Cassie thought. I don't think I can get up and walk away.*

The ecstasy they had shared only moments ago had turned to a sorrow so intense she could barely comprehend it. What should have been the happiest moment of her life was now the most desolate. She could never have imagined anything would hurt so much.

She stirred, and he did not restrain her. She left the bed and, with her back to him, began to dress.

She pulled on her boots; she straightened her hair. When there was no delaying any longer, she said, "Don't come back with me, all right? I'd rather ride alone."

"All right," he answered.

She opened the door and then she couldn't help herself. She had to look back.

He remained as she had left him, half covered by the wool blanket, his arm thrown over his forehead. She had never seen a bleaker expression on anyone's face, and it broke her heart. But she knew her own eyes mirrored his.

She took a breath and kept her voice steady. "Logan," she said softly, "I know you don't want to hear this...but, I love you. That's all."

She did not wait for a reply. She turned, quickly, before the tears spilled over, and then she walked away.

JONAS SAID, "I don't know what else to tell you, Cass." He leaned back in his desk chair. "I'd made this decision long before I had any idea you'd want to come back here to stay."

They were in the ranch office. Amy was sitting across from Jonas, flipping through a fashion magazine. Cassie was on the sofa, absently gazing out the window and wondering how it could possibly have been less than two weeks ago that she had glanced out to see a lanky form step down from the pickup truck....

Cassie had been barely paying attention to Jonas's words. Nothing could have prepared her for the sense of emptiness that had filled her the moment she turned her back on Logan.

Did he miss her as deeply and painfully as she missed him? Did he think of her at all?

It was Amy who first comprehended the meaning of Jonas's words. She stared at her father. "Do you mean...are you saying that you're moving to South America? That you're going to live there?"

He smiled at her. "That's pretty much the size of it, Midget. This group of private ranchers needs a consultant, and they think I'm the man for the job." He looked at her hesitantly. "I was kind of hoping you'd want to come with me. I think it would be a good experience for you, and while it took some persuading, your mother agrees. There's an American school nearby, and—"

Amy's eyes were wide. "But *South America*? Don't they have revolutions there? And snakes?"

"Snakes, yes," he admitted. "But there haven't been too many revolutions in Brazil lately."

Amy sat back, stunned. She murmured, "South America." And said nothing else.

Cassie said, uncertainly, "But what about the ranch?"

Jonas explained patiently, "I'm sorry, Cass, I don't see that you have much choice. You can't run the place by yourself, and the oil company's offer is a good one. You've seen the books. This place has lost over a million dollars in the past three years—"

"A million dollars!" Amy's eyes grew round again. "I didn't know we had that kind of money!"

He smiled a little. "We don't," he admitted. "That's why we can't afford to lose it."

"Paper money," Cassie explained absently to Amy. But there was no arguing with the facts. They were losing money every day, one of the last strongholds in a failing industry. The big oil companies were taking over land all over Wyoming, and the smart ranchers were glad to sell. It was the end of an era. She simply hadn't expected it to be so soon.

When Amy and Jonas had gone, Cassie leaned against the windowsill and stared blankly out. Nothing stirred in the hot, still air, and the day looked as though it would go on forever. She had been a fool for coming here, for thinking that anything of her future could be molded from her past. She had intended to build a life here. If she left, she would have nothing.

But she didn't see that she had much choice. She hadn't the courage or the energy to seek alternatives. And strangely, as she stood there alone in the sturdy little office with memories of a distant stranger haunting her

head, she didn't feel as though she had too much more to lose.

THE production company's advance film crew, consisting of a director, an assistant director, two cameramen, a sound man, a set consultant and various assistants—complete with two vans of equipment—arrived early the next morning.

The director's name was James Barnes; he was young, intense and eager to get to work. Jonas had given the production company free run of the ranch, with the stipulation that ordinary operations not be interfered with. There would be no rearranging of the work schedule for the sake of the cameras. This, Barnes assured Cassie adamantly, suited him perfectly.

He wanted to begin filming footage today, before the ranch hands got word of the crew's arrival. Jonas had told her she would be showing them around, but Cassie had had in mind something more like a scenic tour. She had not realized they would be going right into the thick of the roundup... where Logan was.

Seeing him again would break her heart.

SHE DIRECTED the van to the Twin Fork—a branch in the valley where the herd was being gathered for driving to the nearest line camp and from there to the rail spur. She directed them to park well away from the cattle and the action.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Grant," said Barnes absently, getting out of the van. "We've done this before."

"Not with my cattle you haven't," she returned.

"God, would you look at that? It's beautiful, isn't it? Remington couldn't have painted it any better!"

His eyes were glowing as they swept over the scene—the restless, lowing livestock shifting and kicking up dust before them, the cowhands circling and calling lazily to them, the sturdy ponies going about their jobs by rote.

"We can use the sound," Barnes said. "Levine, get set up—no, I want to use a hand-held camera on this reel. Walk up as close as you can—"

"Now wait just a minute," Cassie protested.

"And get me a zoom lens. I want to see some faces. This is great, just great."

Cassie hovered close, wondering how she was possibly going to be able to stand it for the months it took to complete the filming... and then realized that she probably wouldn't have to. The oil company would honor their contract, but there would be no reason for Cassie to be here after the sale was final.

Barnes said excitedly to the cameraman next to him, "Wait—look. That one there, on the red horse."

Cassie cast him a derisive look—the term was "roan." Then she turned to follow his gesture.

It was Logan.

He was circling in the foreground, and he was not yet in position to look their way. No doubt he had noticed the van, but he was intent upon his job and nothing else.

"Will you look at that?" Barnes was saying. "It's beautiful! My God, I could have spent a fortune and never had such luck. Just look at him! Whatever you do, Levine, don't blow this shot. We're using it."

Cassie, for a moment, was held just as mesmerized as were the strangers. Logan on horseback was a magnificent sight to behold. He sat tall in the saddle, the reins held daintily in one hand, a coiled lariat in the other. It

occurred to Cassie that she had never seen Logan at work before. He was strong, confident and at ease, and she could understand the director's excitement. Logan, a single figure against the backdrop of the Wyoming landscape, epitomized everything that was worth saying about this place.

Cassie had to close her eyes. *I can't*, she thought. *I can't let him go.*

But there was nothing she could do about that, either.

She heard Barnes swear under his breath beside her. "He's seen us." Then, "No, wait, it's okay—he's coming this way. Keep that camera on him. Levine, keep moving! I want his face!"

But Cassie didn't even glance at Barnes. Her eyes were on Logan.

He drew up so close that the startled cameraman had to keep walking backward to keep him in view. Cassie managed to say, "Logan, this is—"

But Logan's eyes were on the cameraman, and his face was grim as he demanded in a low voice, "Turn that camera off."

Alarm and confusion became entangled in the sweeping emotions that were turning and leaping in Cassie's chest, and for a moment she couldn't speak. Barnes snapped, "Keep it rolling. We'll edit later. This is great!"

But Logan gave his horse a gentle nudge, and the animal obediently bumped the cameraman with his shoulder. Man and camera went sprawling in the dirt.

Cassie cried, "Logan, what in the world—?"

Barnes rushed toward his fallen man, who had somehow held on to his camera. Logan dismounted.

"Give me the film," he demanded.

Barnes exclaimed, "Now listen here!"

Logan shoved him roughly aside and bent over the fallen man, grabbing the camera.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" the cameraman said, struggling to his feet.

Barnes cried, "Don't open that, you'll expose—"

Cassie couldn't believe it for a long time afterward. Logan's face was that of a stranger, as Levine grabbed his arm, trying to wrest the camera away from him. In one smooth, almost effortless motion, Logan connected his fist hard with the side of his face. Levine sprawled on the ground with a cry, blood dripping from his nostrils; Barnes stared in motionless horror. Logan removed the film and tossed it high in the air, a celluloid streamer glinting in the sun before it caught on the branches of a tree. Then he turned and handed the camera politely back to Barnes.

Among the little group there was no sound whatsoever except the crunching of Logan's boots as he walked slowly over to Cassie. "Where's your brother?"

Somehow, Cassie found her voice. "At—at the camp."

He nodded and walked back over to his horse.

He had gathered the reins before Cassie's stunned brain allowed her to demand, "Where are you going?"

He looked back at her calmly. "To pick up my pay. It's time I was moving on."

LOGAN, on horseback, arrived sometime after Cassie and the two horrified members of the production company. Jonas, calm as always in a crisis, finally convinced Barnes that he had bargained for authenticity and that's what he had gotten—he had

been warned to stay away from the cattle and the cowhands. Somewhat grudgingly, Barnes agreed he could have handled the situation better, but nothing could console him for the loss of his film.

Cassie shook her head slowly when they were alone. "It makes no sense," she said softly. "It's not like Logan."

Jonas was sitting at the camp table he had set up to sketch designs with the set consultant. He answered simply, "We don't know anything about the man, Cass. These people aren't bound by the same rules that govern conventional behavior. That's what makes them so good at what they do."

Cassie would not accept that. She knew Logan. "Why?" she demanded. "Why would he do such a thing?"

Jonas's gaze moved over her shoulder. "Do you have an answer for that, Logan?" he asked.

Cassie turned sharply, and her heart lurched once and then went very weak. Logan had come up behind her, but he did not look at her. His manner was very relaxed, and he answered Jonas's question quietly. "No, sir, I don't."

Jonas looked at him for a long time. And then he said with a quiet casualness, "You didn't want to be filmed."

Logan answered in the same tone, "That's right."

Cassie stared at him.

Jonas said, "I don't suppose you want to tell us why."

"No," Logan replied simply, "I don't."

Jonas sighed and said at last, "I'm not going to fire you, Logan. I can't afford to lose you."

"I appreciate that. But I can't afford to stay," he replied.

Jonas said, "You'll have to come back to the ranch with me to settle up accounts. I'll see if I can get you a ride into town in the morning."

Logan nodded. "Thanks." He didn't glance at Cassie once. He walked away.

Cassie stood there and listened to the sound of his retreating footsteps, and shock went through her like a dull knife. She wasn't hurt. She was angry. Cassie did not get angry often, and when anger came it was with a low, rolling fury that obscured reason and pride and even her own best interest. Jonas could see it building and he started to say something, but Cassie had already turned sharply on her heel.

She almost bumped into Wilson, who looked as if he wanted to talk to her. She brushed past him, and he called after her, "Mrs. Grant—" But she didn't stop.

She caught up with Logan midway across the compound. He was headed toward the chuck wagon to gather his gear, and she planted herself directly in front of him.

"So," she said tightly, "that's it?"

When she spoke, something flashed across his eyes—a flicker of pain, a quickly squelched regret—but all he said was, "This doesn't concern you, Cassie."

"Like hell it doesn't. You owe me an explanation," she hissed.

There was a gentling on his face, another brief glimpse of that shadow of pain in his eyes, and then he lowered his lashes, obscuring his expression. "I owe you more than an explanation," he said softly. But he did not meet her eyes.

She stood there with love and hurt and frustration welling up inside her like tears unwilling to be shed, and he was so close that a half step would have laid her head upon his chest. She was no longer angry. *Don't go, she thought. Please, Logan, not like this. Because if you go it will really be over.*

She knew if he lifted his eyes to hers the answer would be there. Moments stretched between them like suspended heartbeats, and then he started to look at her.

"Cassie." It was Jonas's voice, tense and agitated, and the moment was shattered. Logan stepped away from her, and they both turned. Jonas hardly glanced at Logan but demanded of Cassie, "Where's Amy? Didn't she come back with you?"

"Come back with me? I thought she was here."

Jonas jerked his head sharply toward Wilson. "Wilson said she rode off this morning with Rodney. I thought she had gone with you out to the range."

Cassie's heart started beating a little faster. "She didn't." She turned to Wilson, who looked miserable and concerned.

"I'm sorry if I did wrong, Mr. Parkington, but I didn't see any harm in letting the boy have time off. And I figured the girl had permission to go riding. It's just that they've been gone so long..."

Cassie glanced at her watch. If Amy had left with Rodney this morning, they had been gone a little over five hours. That was more than a pleasant ride through the countryside.

Logan stood beside her listening, and she could sense his alertness... and his worry. It hung over all of them like a pall, but it was heaviest on Cassie. Dreading the answer, she asked, "Jonas, do you know the ranch maps you keep in your office? Did you happen to notice if any of them were missing this morning?" *Oh, Amy, no, you wouldn't be such a fool.*

Jonas's attention sharpened. "Amy asked to look at them last night. I gave them to her. Why?"

Cassie released a long, unsteady breath. "That's it, then," she said, hardly above a whisper. "Amy and Rodney have gone off to look for Gallagher's gold."

For a long time Jonas looked as though he didn't believe her, but it must have been the stunned belief in Cassie's own expression that convinced him. "I'll round up the men and form search parties," he said. "There's still a chance we can catch them before dark."

"I wouldn't count on it, Mr. Parkington," Logan said. "They've got a good start on you." He turned to Wilson. "Did you notice which way they rode off in?"

Wilson gestured toward the mountains. "West. Rodney likes to ride out there."

"Did they take any provisions?"

Again it was Logan's question, and a good one. Wilson answered, "I didn't notice. I'll go check."

Jonas demanded of Cassie, "Are you sure that's what they're up to?"

Cassie nodded miserably, wrapping her arms around herself against a chill that seemed to come from deep inside her and spread its way out. "She was talking about it yesterday. It seems Rodney inherited this old map. She had this idea about saving the ranch."

Cassie looked bleakly toward the mountains. Amy was a good rider, but she had no experience with the outdoors. Rodney might be a good kid, but he was just a kid. The area they were riding into was rugged and deserted. They could be lost for weeks.

Wilson ran up, puffing. "A couple of bedrolls, some canned goods," he reported. "Looks like they was planning to be gone a while."

Jonas swore sharply. "All right. I'll put every man on it. Maybe they didn't get far. We'll call out the sheriff's heli-

copter. They'll be okay. We'll find them."

He was gone, Wilson jogging to keep up. Logan turned and walked toward the picket line.

Cassie stood there for only another moment. It was her fault. If only she had taken Amy seriously.

She caught up with Logan just as he was stripping his saddle off the roan and transferring it to a fresh horse.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

He glanced at her. "How do you know where I'm going?"

"You're going after Amy and Rodney."

"It could be I'm just lighting out of here. I don't work here anymore and this isn't my problem." He paused in tightening the cinch and looked at her. Their eyes met for what seemed like a very long time, then he straightened up and said, "We're going to need some supplies. If I pick up their trail, I'm not coming back till I find them."

Cassie reacted quickly toward the chuck wagon, and within fifteen minutes, she and Logan were riding out of camp.

THEY RODE northwest at a mild canter, not wanting to tire the horses prematurely. But it was a steady ride, and tiring, and not until they had left the camp and all signs of civilization were left well behind did Logan slow his horse to a walk.

Jonas was organizing search parties to fan out in a wide half circle toward the mountains, but he knew as well as anyone that unless the kids had stopped, there was no chance of finding them before dark.

Each team was equipped with a wide-range, two-way radio, and after an hour Cassie checked in with Jonas.

"Not even a sign of them," his voice cracked back. "I've covered about all I can in the Jeep, and the riders aren't reporting anything, either. How are you doing?"

Cassie glanced at Logan.

"Tell him I've picked up a trail, but I don't know how far it will lead." Those were the first words Logan had said to her since they started out.

Cassie repeated the message.

"Do you want any help?" Jonas sent back.

Logan shook his head. "Too many riders will only confuse matters. Tell him we're staying out overnight."

Cassie pushed transmit again. "Logan says no. We're staying on it, Jonas. Don't expect us in tonight."

THE SUN was barely an aura of radiance above the tops of the mountains when Logan pulled up and dismounted. He scouted around the ground for a while.

"They stopped here," he said, gesturing to some flattened grass. "And got down. Looks like they were having some sort of argument. See, Amy's footprints are going one way, Rodney's another. Then they mounted again, and rode off together. But they were riding far apart, and it's hard to tell which way they went."

Logan squinted into the sun. "It would have been easier riding if they had cut to the east. But if they're really heading straight into the mountains, it would have been quicker to go west. I wish I knew who won that argument." He began to go over the ground again, looking for something he had missed, and Cassie cut a wide circle around him. Then she saw something.

"Logan!" she called out and pointed to the side of a partially em-



bedded rock. It showed a white scar, as though chipped. "Could that be anything?"

"It sure could," he agreed. "It could be a chip left by a horseshoe. And—" he stepped over the rock "—there's another one over here. They went this way."

He turned back to her, the spark in his eyes one of pure admiration. "Where did you learn that, lady?"

"From you," she admitted.

He touched her waist lightly, and said softly, "You're really something, aren't you?"

And that was all. But the moment lingered, and Cassie felt changed.

The route they followed took them higher into the hills. They had barely been riding half an hour when Logan pulled up, turned in his saddle and looked around. "We'll camp here," he decided. "There's water for the horses, and under the pines there it's flat enough for sleeping. We won't find a better spot."

"Do you mean to stop now?" Cassie objected. "There's still a good hour of daylight left."

"And we'll need it for gathering firewood and making camp," he returned. "The horses need the rest, and so do we. There's nothing more we can do today." The curve of his smile was indulgent as he watched her. "They're okay, Cassie," he said gently. "I caught a whiff of their camp smoke a minute ago. My guess is that if we were to move on around that bend a little we could see their fire."

She stared at him. "Then let's do it!"

He shook his head. "We'd never reach them before dark, and I don't want to take any chances with the horses on this rocky ground."

Logan gathered dried wood and built an efficient campfire; Cassie un-

rolled her sleeping bag and used it as ground cover while they heated cans of franks and beans over the coals and made instant coffee in tin cups.

They finished eating in silence, and slowly the atmosphere of their surroundings began to creep into Cassie's consciousness and she thought suddenly, *I belong here*. Until this moment she had not been sure. Now she had no doubt.

The day had turned to twilight, and Logan fed a few more sticks into the coals, building up a blaze. His face flickered orange in the glow. There was a cry in the distance—Cassie knew it was a mountain lion—and her eyes followed the sound.

Logan glanced at her. "Nervous?"

She shook her head. "I was just thinking about Amy. I'll bet she's scared to death."

Logan looked at her thoughtfully. He said, "You surprise me, Cassie Grant." It was a simple statement of fact. "From the very first minute I met you, you haven't stopped surprising me. I thought you were a spoiled city girl who was too quick to jump in over her head. You turned out to be a strong woman." And he lowered his lashes briefly. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that Amy will surprise you, too. I think she takes after her aunt in a lot of ways."

Cassie lowered her eyes, and the swell of gratitude and love within her was so intense it choked her voice for a minute and made her eyes burn.

The touch of his fingers, light upon hers, caused her to look up, startled, and the tears evaporated in her throat. His eyes were so tender, his smile so gentle, that everything within Cassie was lost beneath it. "Do you know what else I think?" he said softly. "I think you're not going to follow your brother's very good advice and sell this

place. I think you're going to find a way to stay here, because you know that's what you have to do."

She smiled at him. "I think you're right," she answered.

The moment between them was sweet and pure, a simple joining of minds and a sharing of souls. They both knew what was going to happen next, and neither did anything to stop it.

His fingers traveled to her face, cupping it gently. His eyes, open and vulnerable, moved closer to hers. They kissed, and in the simple joining, plain in its need, inevitable in its destiny, the outpouring of emotions was unstoppable. They turned on the sleeping bag, and with the pine-straw-covered earth as their bed, and the darkening sky as their canopy, they made love.

As natural as the rising stars, as silent as the wind through the trees, they came together in joy and wanting, yet it was more than passion that drove them. They joined like two parts of a whole unnatural in its separation; they shared because they knew no other way. And afterward they lay together, wrapped still in the cocoon of each other's embrace, and both knew that from this moment forward, nothing would ever be the same.

Cassie felt his heart beat beneath her cheek, the silky dampness of his chest hair against her fingers. His arms held her so tightly that there was a tremor in his muscles, and she knew the desperation that filled her was not hers alone. His voice was hoarse, and very quiet, as he said, "I was wrong, Cassie. All the time I was telling myself that I had to stay away from you because I knew I would only hurt you. But that wasn't really it at all. What I was afraid of all the time was hurting myself. Because..." And with his hand he smoothed back her hair, making her

lift her face to look at him. There was dark and distant agony in his eyes, a raw yearning in his face. He said, barely above a whisper, "I want to marry you. I want forever. But I can't," he said simply. "I can't have forever. I can't have any of the things most men take for granted. You see—I'm running from the law."

He stood up to pull on his jeans, and Cassie could see his shadow, but not the man. Her heartbeat sounded slow, too slow. She said nothing.

He squatted in front of the fire and began to roll a cigarette. It took a very long time. "It was back in Texas," he said. "They had been moving some stuff, drugs, across the border in our sector. My partner and I had the operation staked out, we were ready to make the bust. Next thing I knew, the local officials were in on it, and my partner was arrested. I guess I should have been grateful it wasn't me, but all I could feel was fury because I hadn't seen it coming. It was a perfect setup, and we all knew that county was crooked. But it got worse. The feds wanted the big man, and it suited them to let my partner take the fall while they stalled for time. It was a beautiful frame. They even had the perfect witness, me. I was called before the grand jury, and I wouldn't testify. They slapped me in jail.

"I stayed there for two weeks, and every day they'd bring me out and every day I didn't say a word. And then, the next thing I knew, I was being charged with trafficking. They'd found some stuff in my car." He drew on the cigarette, his voice toneless. "So I did the only reasonable thing... I broke out of jail. And I assaulted a couple of guards in the process. That's a federal offense, Cassie. As if I didn't have enough trouble.

"The next thing I knew, I was in New Mexico, looking at my face on a 'Wanted' poster." He shook his head slowly and added, "I guess you understand now why I'm not too crazy about the idea of appearing on film for thousands of moviegoers across the country."

Cassie began to dress, and she did it with slow and dreamlike movements that seemed to have nothing to do with her at all. It was a long time later that she found her voice. "You're innocent," she said. "Surely if you went back..."

He shook his head. "I thought about that, once. I even checked up on it. The original case died quietly within a year. They let my partner go, and God knows where he is now. But they never dropped the charges against me. If I should ever be picked up, the paperwork alone would keep me in jail until it doesn't matter anymore."

Her heart was still pounding loudly. "If you got a lawyer—"

But he hardly seemed to hear her. "I've been living like an outlaw in an old-time Western for three years. I can never stay too long in one place. I can't have a bank account or sign my name to a legal paper. My driver's license expired two years ago and I'm afraid to get a new one. And everywhere I look I'm afraid someone will recognize me. They wouldn't, of course, but fear is like a cancer—it eats away your reason."

And then he turned to her. "I can't go back, Cassie," he said simply. "I don't know any other way of life anymore."

She reached for him and they wrapped their arms around each other, and that's the way they stayed throughout the night. Perhaps each of them knew that it would be the last night they would share.

\*

THE SKY was barely pink next morning when they picked up the trail again. An hour's riding, and Cassie could smell the smoke of a campfire for herself. They came around the curve of a hill and fifty feet below them were Amy and Rodney, cooking bacon in an iron skillet.

Cassie stood in the stirrups and called out. Amy waved joyfully as Cassie and Logan rode down to them.

There was confusion. Amy, looking none the worse for wear, flung herself into her aunt's arms the moment Cassie dismounted. "I'm sorry if you were worried, and I know I probably shouldn't have, but wait until you hear—"

And Rodney, who had hung back, spoke up. "Miz Grant. Mr. Logan. I know you're mad and you've got a right to be, but there's something you ought to know."

But Logan had already seen. "It looks like fire tracks." He looked back at Rodney. "A truck?"

"It's Amos," Rodney said. Amos was the ex-cook, the man whose job Cassie had taken. "And that fellow Bill. They're the ones who've been stealing your cattle, Miz Grant."

Cassie said hoarsely, "You were out here all night with those men—"

"Oh, they went away," Amy said airily. "I wanted to follow them, but Rodney wouldn't let me."

"From the sound of the engine," Rodney put in, "I guess they're parked just on the other side of those cottonwoods over there. I'll be glad to show you—"

Logan said, "You stay here. Cassie, take care of the kids. I'm going to ride over and take a look."

Cassie said quickly, "Be careful."

"I always am," he told her.

As he rode off, Cassie turned back to Amy, knowing she should deliver a fierce and furious lecture but suddenly lacking the words. Instead, she demanded, still a little huskily, "Did you find the gold?"

With unspoken consent from Rodney, Amy said, "We found it. That is, we found the place. There's a cave still here, but the stream is gone. No one could ever find it if they didn't have an old map to compare with the new one."

She paused for breath. "We've been digging all morning, moving rocks and stuff. It's a mess, but we're almost through."

Cassie heard the faint beat of helicopter rotors overhead, but it was not yet in sight. "That's your father, and the sheriff." Then, to Rodney, "I'd say you have less than fifteen minutes to find that gold."

Cassie tried to raise the helicopter on the radio. It was not yet within range. She went to join Rodney and Amy.

She arrived just as Rodney wiggled inside the cave. Amy kept demanding, "Well, what do you see? Rodney, hurry up! Is it there?"

At last Rodney backed out. He said heavily, "It was there."

He opened his hand and revealed a single, tarnished, dirt-encrusted coin. Cassie took it from him slowly, brushing away the grime until she could read the Spanish inscription. She couldn't believe it. The legend had been true.

"Somebody got to it before we did," Rodney said glumly. "Who knows when. And they left this as a souvenir."

Cassie handed the coin back to Rodney. "This is very old," she said. "It might even be worth thousands. And it's yours."

Rodney opened his hand, looking at the single remnant of a lost dream with new respect. Just then the radio on Cassie's belt began to crackle.

She opened her transmitter. "Jonas?"

"Cassie, I'm with Sheriff Keys."

"We've found them, Jonas. They're okay. We're located at—"

She glanced at Rodney, who hastily repeated the landmarks from the map. "We're about half a mile due west from the Old Spring Trail." She squinted into the sky. "I have you in sight, just barely. If you swing northwest, you should be able to see us."

She saw the dust from Logan's horse, and felt the anxiety quicken again. She hurried to meet him.

"Well, lady, quite a day, hmm? Two lost kids and a couple of rustlers."

"Did you—?"

"They've got about six of your cattle in a makeshift corral just where Rodney said. The tracks from the truck will lead you right to them. There's no one around now, but they're going to be mighty irritated to find their truck's missing some ignition wires. If the sheriff's waiting for them, I guess they'll go along peacefully enough."

The beating of helicopter rotors grew closer.

"Cassie." Jonas's voice came from the radio. "We've got you in sight. We're coming in."

And then the entire dreamlike morning dissolved into a pinpoint of reality as she looked up at Logan. Her throat went dry. "The sheriff will want to talk to you."

His voice was mild. "I guess he will."

The pounding in her chest became harder. "You can't take that chance."

He looked at her, and what she saw in his eyes she couldn't begin to understand. Denial, reluctance, re-

gret... courage. If she asked him, would he stay?

He looked at her for the longest time. The pulsing sound of the chopper grow closer. And he said, quietly, "I love you, Cassie. I just wanted you to know that."

Then he nudged his horse and rode away.

\*

IT WAS spring at the Circle P, and Cassie thought there could not be anything more beautiful in all creation. Jonas and Amy were in Brazil, reporting with monthly letters that were almost book-length.

Red still lived in the bunkhouse and complained daily about wanting to retire but refusing to leave a helpless woman in charge. Rodney had enrolled in the vocational school in Jackson. The proceeds from the antique coin had given him the inspiration to further his ambition. And the Circle P was now owned and operated by KalCo Oil.

She had sold to the oil company most of the acreage and livestock at a satisfactory profit. She had retained three thousand acres and a royalty on mineral rights. Even Jonas was impressed, for she drove a hard bargain. With her percentage of the royalty, Cassie was able to run a small herd of mostly breeding stock, and to preserve in her small corner of Wyoming a way of life that had endured for centuries. There were fences now where once there had been open range; there was economy where once there had been grandeur. But when the sun set over the mountains, there were men on horseback silhouetted against the skyline; rugged cattle grazed the hills and valleys, and the tradition, for one more generation, thrived.

Jonas thought she was crazy. She was relying on the Circle P—what was left of it—as her only source of income. Everything she earned went right back into the ranch. She was learning about budgets and management and income tax; she was part veterinarian, part businesswoman, part cowhand. None of it was easy. But for the first time in many years, Cassie felt alive—and she was surviving.

Cassie was drawn out of her reverie by the sound of tires coming up the muddy drive. She caught a glimpse of a dusty red Mustang, circa 1970, and then the car turned off to park beside the office.

She heard the car door slam and the murmur of male voices, and with a sigh she switched on her calculator. It was best to let Red feel he was in charge.

She heard footsteps on the outside stairs, surprised that Red would bring their visitor in so soon. Then she realized there were not two sets of footsteps but one. When the door opened, he stood silhouetted in the glare of the sun, a tall, lanky figure in jeans and boots and a Stetson hat, and she did not know why she had ever expected anyone else.

Somehow she managed to get to her feet but could go no farther. She could only stand there, filling her eyes with him, as she said softly, "Hi there, cowboy. Looking for a job?"

Logan took off his hat and stepped forward. He smiled at her. "Just passing through, ma'am."

His hair was shorter and he was clean-shaven. He was wearing a tan corduroy jacket and a sweater vest over his jeans, and his boots had not seen a stirrup in a long time. But his eyes still held the depths of her soul, and his smile was still connected to her heart.

For the longest time they simply stood there, absorbing each other, renewing each other, and it seemed as though they had all the time in the world.

Logan said at last, "I see you found a way to do it."

She nodded. "You knew I would."

He said simply, "I'm glad."

"What—what about you, Logan? Where have you been? How have you—?"

His eyes crinkled, and he nodded toward the window. "I have a driver's license now. And a car. I found a good lawyer," he told her. "A lawyer with a grudge against the system, I should say. He fought like hell for me. I ended up with a suspended sentence." He was watching her carefully. "And a criminal record. All in all, not much more than I left here with."

Cassie took one slow step around the desk. And then another. And then she was looking straight into his eyes. "No," she said. "You do have more than you left here with."

He smiled. "If you mean freedom and self-respect, you're right," he agreed.

And she shook her head slowly. "I mean," she said simply, "you have more than that. It's been here all the time."

She saw the leap in his eyes, hope and need or perhaps even fear. "Cassie..." His voice was hoarse. "I only wanted to see you again, to tell you...well, how things were. I thought you deserved that."

Her voice was very quiet. "I deserve more."

His eyes were mesmerized. "I didn't ask you to wait for me."

"But I did."

He moved, or she moved, and they were in each other's arms. Their embrace was swift and fierce and timeless; they did not kiss but merely wrapped their arms around each other, welcoming a long-lost friend, reuniting with a missing part of themselves. She felt his lips against her hair, his cheek against her ear. He whispered, "Cassie, I'm no good at this. I can't offer you anything. I—"

She lifted her face, and she said, "I'm not asking you for anything."

She moved away from him, just a little, and let her hands drift to his shoulders. She whispered, "Are you going to leave me again?"

Pain crossed his eyes. His voice was husky. "No."

"Do you want to marry me?"

There was no hesitation this time. He drew her into his arms, and the word was but a breath. "Yes."

She buried her face in his jacket; she let herself open to joy. And then in the delirium of the life that was just opening up for them, Cassie touched his face and looked up at him. "Just one thing," she said. "What is your name?"

His eyes crinkled with the beginnings of laughter; the sparks in them danced like embers in the night. "It's Phillip," he said. "Phillip Logan Stephens."

Cassie felt like laughing, too. But all she did was step again into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck, pressing her cheek against his shoulder. "Well then, Phillip Logan Stephens," she murmured, "welcome home."






# **SUSAN FOX**

## **The Black Sheep**



Willa Ross had left home in disgrace. But when an emergency called her back, she had to face Clay Cantrell, the man she'd once adored . . . but who'd sworn never to forgive her. . . .





Willa Ross walked up the grassy incline, taking a spot to the side of the large group of mourners. She didn't join her Aunt Tess and her cousin, Paige, the only ones seated beneath the emerald canopy that shaded the flower-draped casket; her estrangement from them and her late uncle, Calvin Harding, had been too traumatic and had lasted too long.

From where he stood with the other pallbearers, Clayton Cantrell saw Willa stop a few feet short of the group of mourners. A shock wave of rage and grief rolled over him and settled like a rock in his middle.

Slim, clad in a simple fawn-colored dress, Willa looked little different from the mischievous minx she'd been as a teenager. Her sandy-brown hair had been twisted into a prim knot, but her features were much the same delicate, pretty ones they'd been at seventeen. Five years had only enhanced her beauty.

The weight inside him began to twist. It was because of Willa that his kid sister, Angela, lay just over the hill in a grave next to their parents'.

The bitterness he thought had eased over the years suddenly filled his heart and deepened the harsh grooves that bracketed his mouth.

"Shall we recite the Lord's Prayer?" the minister suggested. Then he began, "'Our Father, Who art in Heaven . . .'"

"'And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us . . .'"

Clay Cantrell repeated the words by rote, without thought to their mean-

ing, his hard black eyes fixed on Willa's face, and as if she sensed his hostility, her gaze suddenly swung, then impacted with his.

Black eyes cold with dislike caused the words of the prayer to lodge in her throat. Willa couldn't look away from that tanned, ruggedly handsome face with its strong, well-constructed contours and bold male cut of mouth, couldn't resist assessing the tall, wide-shouldered, lean-hipped body. Dark haired, dressed entirely in black, from the Stetson he held to his suit to his dress boots, Clay Cantrell was a towering, intimidating man—nothing like the indulgent older brother of her best friend that she'd known him to be.

"Amen." The minister concluded the recitation; then led the mourners in one of Aunt Tess's favorite hymns.

It was as the minister began to make a few last remarks about Calvin Harding's passing that Aunt Tess turned, her glance connecting with Willa's. For a stunned moment, neither could react. Then, as if suddenly oblivious to the concluding service, Tess got unsteadily to her feet, laid her handbag on her chair and started to walk away. Paige rose from her chair, clearly startled by her mother's behavior.

Willa felt sick with apprehension as her aunt headed grimly toward her. By then, everyone else was turning to see who or what Tess was so intent upon. All sound and movement halted as Willa was recognized.

It took every bit of strength Willa had just to stand there, waiting for her aunt's rejection or acceptance.

And then Tess's grim expression eased, her mouth curved into a watery smile. Just as Willa started forward to grasp her aunt's outstretched hands, Tess suddenly faltered, stopped, then collapsed onto the grass.

For the first few seconds no one but Willa moved. And then the chaos began.

"Someone get my medical bag!" Dr. Elliot crouched to move Tess onto her back. Willa watched helplessly as he felt for a pulse, relieved when he appeared to find it. Already his station wagon was being driven off the cemetery lane toward them. In seconds he was alternately listening with his stethoscope and issuing orders.

Willa was startled by a strident indictment.

"This is your fault."

Willa turned dazed eyes toward her cousin, Paige.

"Why did you have to show up?" the brunette demanded. "My God, if she dies..."

Clay Cantrell was at Paige's side instantly, his arm going around her consolingly.

"Please, Clay, make her go." Paige's plea was partly muffled against the lapel of Clay's suit jacket.

"Willa?" Clay's voice was a chilling menace.

Daring to hesitate, Willa tore her eyes from the warning in Clay's. "Will she be all right?" she asked the doctor as her aunt was lifted onto a stretcher.

"Don't know," he answered gruffly, and Willa was dismissed with a curt turn of his head. "Would you like to ride along, Paige?" the doctor asked.

Willa stepped back as Dr. Elliot brushed past her to escort Paige to the car. Wanting to follow, she hurried across the grass toward her own vehicle. Willa had almost reached it, when she heard booted feet behind her.

Sensing who it was, she tried to increase her pace, but he caught her arm and swung her roughly around.

Wary green eyes flew upward to meet the black intensity of Clay's.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Willa couldn't pull out of his grip. "Paying my last respects," she answered.

Clay released her arm. "The funeral's over, so you can move on," he advised.

"I'm going to the hospital," she said.

"No one wants you there."

Clay felt something inside him soften at the anguish that flickered over her face. That Willa had suffered these past years was apparent to him, but this girl's actions had taken his sister's life and he'd be damned if he'd let himself feel sorry for her.

"Go back to wherever it is you came from. There's nothing for you here," he said.

"I want to make certain Aunt Tess is all right."

"I think you've done enough."

Clay's words robbed her of breath. *He blamed her for this, too.* The realization was staggering.

Willa turned and walked the last steps to the car. Clay reached around her and opened the door.

"Don't go to the hospital, Willa. You'll just upset everyone again and stir up the past."

"Maybe it needs to be stirred up," she challenged.

"She's a sick woman, Willa. If you want another death on your conscience, then just you go on over."

Without another word, she got into her car.

WILLA STEPPED out of the service station rest room, changed from her

dress, stockings and heels into a plaid shirt, jeans and her well-worn Western boots. Her dark blond hair now tumbled freely just past her shoulders.

She went directly to her car, passing up a last opportunity for a quick meal at the truck-stop diner next door. She wasn't fit to be seen after the storm of heartbroken tears that had left her eyes puffy and red.

She quickly tossed her things into the small suitcase in the trunk. Next to it, the larger case she'd filled with enough clothes to last a week mocked her. She'd had such hope when she'd packed it. Now she knew there was truly no going back. Even if she could, there was no way to expose the horrible lies of the past without further jeopardizing her aunt's health. Judging from the hostility shown her at the funeral, no one would believe her now any more than they had then. She'd not gone to the hospital, after all, too frightened that Clay was right.

The late-model car started easily, as Willa headed for the interstate to continue her long drive home. She was only about fifty miles from Cascade—her *real* home, came the thought before Willa pushed it away.

These days, home was the D & R, more than two hundred miles from Cascade, Wyoming, just northeast of Colorado Springs. She was part-owner of the modest ranch where she and her partner, Ivy Dayton, raised quarter horses. Willa had sunk a major portion of the money she'd inherited from her parents into her half of the ranch. It was Uncle Cal who'd banished Willa from their home the day she turned eighteen: she'd been on her own since then.

Remembering Aunt Tess's reluctance to throw her out had inspired the crazy idea that perhaps they could be reconciled now that her uncle was

gone. She knew now that it just wasn't to be.

At the next interchange, a state patrol car came down the ramp, merging into the lane a few car lengths behind her. Startled by its siren a few moments later, she checked her rearview mirror to see the cruiser bearing down on her, red lights flashing. Willa pulled onto the shoulder, fully expecting the patrolman to drive on past since she wasn't violating any traffic law, but he pulled up behind her, then got out of his car.

Willa hastily rolled down her window.

"Evening, miss. Would your name be Willa Ross?"

She nodded.

"Well, Miss Ross, I'm sorry to say it seems you have a family emergency back in Cascade. They've requested that we locate you and provide you with an escort back as soon as possible."

Willa's chest went tight. "Do you know any of the details?"

The patrolman shook his head. "No, miss, I'm afraid I don't, but I had the impression they were in a big hurry for you to get back there."

Willa was having trouble keeping back her tears.

"Are you all right, miss?"

"I'll be all right," she assured the officer.

THE ELEVATOR doors slid open and Willa stepped out, going directly to the nurses' station, where she was directed to the wing that housed the cardiac care unit. Willa did her best to harden herself to the reception she knew was waiting.

There wasn't a face in the waiting room that offered any kind of welcome, and more than one gaze went

directly to Clay Cantrell, as if to gauge his reaction to her arrival.

Clay's flinty expression revealed nothing as he stood leaning against the far wall. Next to him Paige sat staring at her accusingly, and Willa felt the old anger rise and swell. The enmity between the two cousins was too strong to go undetected. There wasn't a person in the small room who didn't feel it—or misjudge the reason for it.

Willa took a quick breath and started across the room to her cousin. "How is she?"

"Dr. Elliot says she's stabilized. No thanks to you," Paige added.

"I'm surprised you went to all the trouble of having the state patrol track me down."

Paige's eyes were half-lidded with contempt. "Mother was asking for you. The doctor thought it wise to cater to her, or you wouldn't be here."

"When can I see her?"

"If she doesn't mention you when she wakes up again, then never."

Willa felt her face go bloodless. It was no less than she should have expected. Perhaps the delicate lines of strain on her cousin's lovely face were there more out of fear for herself than grief for her late father or worry for her mother. Only Willa knew the secrets Paige concealed.

"Paige." Dr. Elliot stood in the doorway, beckoning her into the privacy of the hall, and Clay escorted her out. "You'd better step out here, too," he called to Willa, his disapproval evident.

Willa hurried to comply, her heart racing. Just as she reached the small group, Paige made a little sound of despair, then pulled her arm from Clay's to rush down the hall to the nearest rest room.

"You can step in for five minutes, Willa, not a moment more," Dr. El-

liot cautioned. Then he warned, "She can't take any kind of upset right now."

Willa's cheeks reddened. She was outraged at his manner, but mindful of the fact that she had another chance with her aunt because of him.

Willa turned and walked toward the CCU. She tried to ignore Clay, who fell in beside her. He didn't say a word until she stopped to speak to the nurse.

"I'll be watching, Willa."

Willa's eyes flew to his, his quiet warning telling her how great the chasm of mistrust between them was.

"You do that, Clay," she murmured as he took a position in front of the observation window.

Willa glanced anxiously at the nurse who had accompanied her and was now standing at the foot of Tess's bed. The nurse nodded and Willa reached out hesitantly to touch her aunt's thin hand.

"I'm here, Aunt Tess."

Tess's eyes fluttered a moment before opening fully.

"Willa." Tess's dove-gray eyes were soft, and her pale lips twitched with the effort it took to smile. Willa gently pressed her aunt's hand between both of hers. "Missed you so," she whispered, and Willa felt the sharp sting of tears.

"I've missed you, too, Auntie." Willa's voice wobbled as she rubbed the back of her aunt's hand.

"Please...stay," Tess said. "I want you with me."

"I will," Willa vowed.

"Kept your room...just the way it was." Tess blinked as if her eyelids were heavy weights. "I want you to come home."

Willa's eyes clogged with more tears. Going back to the Circle H Ranch was impossible now, but there was no reason for her aunt to know just yet. Since

they'd had no contact in five years, Tess didn't know about the life she'd made for herself in Colorado.

The nurse touched Willa's shoulder, signaling her it was time to leave.

Willa leaned down to kiss her aunt's cheek. "Get a good night's rest. I'll be back in the morning."

Willa was shaking and her eyes were blurred as she followed the nurse out.

"A lot of it's the medication she's on," the nurse explained when she saw Willa's flushed face.

"Will she live?" Willa had to ask the question.

"She's stable. The next forty-eight hours will tell. She was sure determined to see you."

As Willa stepped into the hall, the tears began. Unfortunately Clay was still waiting, and she made a swift effort to control herself, fumbling through her purse for Kleenex.

"Here." Clay pressed a spotless white handkerchief into her fingers.

"Thanks." Willa turned from him, using the hankie to muffle her sudden attack of sniffles.

Clay watched, detecting the tremors that went through her small body, irritated that he couldn't be indifferent to her feelings. But something about Willa had always affected him, even when she'd been a child.

"I'll see that you get your hankie back," Willa said as she stuffed it in her bag, then stepped into the main hall to leave. Clay's voice stopped her.

"You got a place to stay?"

"The motel I stayed at last night may have a vacancy."

"Good." He nodded, and Willa suddenly understood.

"Don't worry, Clay. I wouldn't think of imposing on my cousin."

"Just so you don't get it in your head to take advantage of either her or Tess," he said.

Willa felt a spurt of anger. "So you're their self-appointed protector," she concluded. "If I were you, I'd mind my own business."

Clay's eyes glittered. "You are my business," he growled. "And until you leave town permanently, I plan to keep an eye on you. You aren't a seventeen-year-old kid this time, Willa," he said. "This time you'll pay for anything you do."

Willa's eyes were overbright as the sense of betrayal that had festered for five years surged to the surface. "Just make sure you've got all the facts," she said, then added pointedly, "this time."

Willa turned and walked briskly down the hall to the elevators, her heart little more than a throbbing wound in her chest.

"YOU'RE LOOKING much better today, Aunt Tess," Willa offered quietly, all too aware of Paige's sullen presence at the other side of the bed.

A week had gone by since the funeral, and this was Tess's second day out of the CCU and in her own private room. The doctor had assured them all that while her recovery would be slower than normal due to her grief for her husband, she was doing well. Willa's relief knew no bounds.

On the other hand, now that Tess was recovering, Willa would have to think about leaving soon.

"I'm feeling much, much better, Willa," Tess said, as she gazed fondly at her niece. "Having you back has been like a tonic."

Willa shoved her hands into her jeans pockets, suddenly nervous. Tess kept talking as if Willa were back in Cascade for good. Was now a good time to reintroduce the idea that she

would soon have to head back to Colorado?

"I've got a woman coming in today to do your hair for you, Mother," Paige interjected.

"You already mentioned it, Paige," Tess said. "Right now, I want to talk to Willa about the ranch before I run out of steam."

Paige's face paled. "Please, Mother, don't."

Tess glanced over at her daughter. "We went over this last night, Paige, and I don't want to rehash any of it. In another week, you'll be going on a new assignment for that modeling agency and I'll have no one to keep an eye on things. From what Willa's told me about the place she's working, she'd be perfect for the job." Tess turned to look at Willa, catching the surprise on her face.

While Tess had asked her a number of questions about her life, they had been more specifically about Willa's abilities. The way people in Cascade seemed to feel about her, Willa hadn't been comfortable confiding all the details of her life to anyone, not even her aunt. And now, with Paige hovering, she was not about to mention that she was half owner of the D & R Ranch.

"I need your help, Willa," Tess began earnestly. "Ever since Cal took sick four years back, the ranch hasn't been doing very well. We had to let go of all but two of the hands. One quit a few weeks ago. The other—" Tess shook her head "—has a problem with liquor. I need someone to take over for me or I'll lose everything. Cal worked so hard for that ranch. I can't lose it now." Her soft gray eyes grew misty. "I know you've got hard feelings against Cal, but it would mean an awful lot to me if you'd stay on and help."

"Mother," Paige murmured, "we don't need her."

"I need her," Tess said, overruling her daughter.

Willa couldn't believe what she was hearing. Tess was not only asking her to stay, but to take on a job that would challenge even an experienced rancher. It was hard enough these days to turn a profit in ranching, let alone try to stabilize a ranch that was in trouble.

The D & R was about the same size as her aunt's ranch and she'd managed that, but if the Circle H was too far gone...

"I don't think I'm the person for the job, Auntie," Willa said, wanting to let her aunt down gently.

"I can't think of anyone better," Tess countered. "And you'd be home, Willa. That's something I've wanted since the day Cal sent you away."

Tess's outspoken confidence brought a lump to Willa's throat.

"Mother," Paige said, tossing her dark mane of hair defiantly, "I don't want Willa here."

The fatigue that had gradually crept over Aunt Tess's face was suddenly dispelled, and her soft eyes went stern. "Your father was wrong to send Willa away, Paige. There wasn't a day went by that I didn't regret letting him have his way. Now that she's back—" Tess turned. "Please, Willa," she coaxed. "At least go out to the ranch and look things over."

Willa shied from the hope on her aunt's face. "Even if I said yes, what about Clay Cantrell?"

"Yes, Mother," said Paige. "How do you think he'd feel with Willa around—as a reminder?"

Willa stiffened, unable to keep from glaring at her cousin.

"All right, Auntie," she heard herself say. "I'll go out and take a look at

the Circle H. But before I decide, I want to talk to Clay."

CLAY CANTRELL'S Orion Ranch lay just to the south of the much smaller Circle H. Willa could have ridden a horse to the house in less time than it would take her to drive over, but the days when little formality was observed had died with her best friend, Angie.

Willa knew she wouldn't be welcome at Orion, though just how unwelcome remained to be seen. At the moment, she was too furious to care.

She was worn-out and discouraged, angry over the condition of the Circle H. She'd driven out to the ranch as her aunt had asked, and was truly shocked by the run-down house and buildings. Signs of waste and laziness were everywhere.

Then she'd met Art Boles, the Circle H's hired hand, and had been outraged at both his drunken state and his bad manners. He'd refused to cooperate with her, so Willa had finally selected and saddled a horse, to ride out and look over as much of the ranch as possible that afternoon.

There wasn't a fence on the place that didn't need some kind of repair. In a matter of days, the hay pasture would need to be cut and baled, but the tractor was out of commission and apparently had been for quite some time.

Willa had stomped over to the bunkhouse in a fine fury. This time Boles was defensive, his manner bordering on belligerence.

"Too much work for one man," he'd grumbled. "And what the hell gives you the right to come snoopin' around here, anyway? I don't have to answer to you."

Willa had nodded in agreement, her mouth set in a sour slash. "That may change, Mr. Boles. If it does, I can assure you that you won't have to answer to me long, since you'll be out of a job." Not trusting herself to keep from ordering him off the Circle H at that very moment, Willa had turned and gone to her car. It sickened her to think that Art Boles had been collecting the wages Tess had been hard put to pay, while he'd given very little work in exchange.

Willa was reminded of Clay's eagerness to make sure she didn't take advantage of her aunt. He'd threatened to keep a close eye on her, when all the time he'd overlooked what Art Boles had been doing. Willa made up her mind to point that out to him if he objected too strongly to her staying on at the Circle H. Because she was going to stay, she'd decided.

Too soon she reached the turnoff and was braking to a stop in front of the Cantrell ranch house.

Willa had spent a lot of time in that house and on this ranch. She and Angie had been fast friends, the fact that they were the same age and had both been orphaned linking them together. Bright and irrepressible, they'd both been a challenge for Clay, who seemed to be the only one who could tolerate their antics for long. Willa had envied Angie her elder brother until she'd matured enough to develop a mild crush on him.

She went up the front walk to the door, hesitating only a moment more before she knocked. She waited a bit, then knocked again. The door opened.

"Hello, Clay."

His six-foot-four height filled the doorway, the breadth of his shoulders taking up much of its width. He didn't seem surprised to see her, but his eyes held a cold challenge.



"I'd like to talk to you, if I may," she said, resolving to cling to her good memories of him rather than dwell on the animosity he held toward her now. "Please, Clay," she added softly.

The moments ticked by, until Willa was certain he wasn't going to allow her into his house. At last he stood aside and gestured for her to enter.

The moment Willa crossed the threshold it was like stepping backward in time. Nothing had changed inside the large room, from the heavy leather and wood furniture to the American-Indian artifacts on the walls and the woven rugs on the polished wood floor.

"You said you wanted to talk."

Clay's deep voice startled her and she turned quickly toward him. There was no hint of softness in his flinty expression, and it reminded her of the last time she'd stood before him in this room—trying to tell him about the accident. He'd been drinking heavily that night. "Get out of this house!" he'd roared, too grief stricken at the sight of her to allow her even a moment to explain. She had been inconsolable.

Suddenly the longing to try again, telling Clay what had really happened, was overwhelming. Was the lie he'd accepted five years earlier still stronger than the truth? Did she have the courage to find out?

The memory of her aunt collapsing in the cemetery brought Willa back to reality. What would it do to Tess if she were again to insist that Paige's reckless driving had caused the accident? The mere suggestion of the truth could be enough to threaten her aunt's life.

Willa felt the old helplessness stir. She could say nothing.

"I suppose Paige called to tell you why I'm here," she began.

"She called earlier today. Said Tess had asked you to stay on and take over the Circle H."

"Then you also know that Tess asked me to go out and look things over."

"She told me that, too."

"I've decided to stay," Willa said simply. "The Circle H is in bad shape and I'll stay just long enough to help straighten things out for Aunt Tess and find someone reliable to take over. I doubt if I'd be around for more than a month."

"What could you do?"

Willa's chin lifted at his skepticism. "A lot more than my aunt's friends and neighbors have done."

Clay's hard expression didn't alter. "Tess's too damned proud to allow much help."

"She's always been that way," Willa agreed. "But she's asked for my help. I want to do it, Clay."

Clay couldn't help but read the shadowy longing in Willa's green eyes. Her face was stiff and her lips were pressed together with the effort she made to hide her feelings from him. He knew that look as well as he'd known her once upon a time. It was because he could tell that she was trying to conceal it all from him and not play on his sympathy that he felt something penetrate his bitterness and sink deeply into his heart.

"Then I reckon we'd both better stay out of each other's way," he growled irritably as he turned away.

Willa was glad he couldn't see her face just then. "Tess will be relieved. Thanks." Willa stared a moment more at that proud set of shoulders before she turned and left quietly.

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WILLA WAS UP early the next morning to call her partner, Ivy Dayton.

"Take whatever time you need," Ivy said after Willa had related the details of her aunt's situation. "Deke and I can hire some summer help if we need to."

"Thanks a lot, Ivy. I really appreciate it."

"Shucks, it's no more'n you'd do for me," Ivy said dismissively, and Willa smiled at the image she had of her red-haired, freckle-faced friend, who was almost eight years her senior. "You just take care of yourself up there."

"Don't worry. I've grown up some in the past five years," Willa replied, not needing to say more since Ivy knew everything.

Ivy snorted. "So has that cousin of yours. Now that you're back she's bound to be nervous as a weasel and twice as sneaky. You already know what she's capable of when it comes to saving her own hide."

Willa grimaced at the reminder. "I'll be careful, Ivy. Thanks."

"Let me know if you need anything."

"I will. Call you in another week or so," Willa said.

"I JUST HOPE you know what you're doing firing Art Boles," Paige said snidely from the doorway. Willa glanced up from the books she'd been poring over all evening, frowning at the reminder of the scene Art Boles had made that afternoon when she'd fired him and paid him off. "He was probably the only cowhand in the county who'd work for you."

"He wasn't working, period," Willa reminded her. "What do you want,

Paige?" she demanded ungraciously. She was tired and planned to be up at first light the next morning.

"I'd like to talk," Paige answered.

"I'm not too interested in anything you have to say," Willa said coldly as she closed the ledgers and stacked them.

"You might be, cousin," Paige went on haughtily, perching on the arm of the nearest wing chair. Chicly clad in a blue silk dress, she looked every bit the successful fashion model. The stunning combination of long, wavy raven tresses, clear luminescent skin and exotic violet eyes made her a natural. "If you and I can't come to some kind of understanding, Mother's going to be the one who suffers most."

"Scared?" Willa challenged, though the realization brought her little satisfaction. In spite of what Paige had done, Willa hated the antagonism between them.

"It could literally kill Mother if you were to start trouble," Paige persisted.

Willa struggled to suppress her anger as she faced her cousin. "I get the message."

"That's good," Paige said, her brow arched. Then, to Willa's surprise, her haughty look altered. "For what it's worth, Willa, I'm sorry."

Willa couldn't have been more shocked, but managed to keep it to herself.

"I was terrified of what would happen to me if I told the truth," Paige began. "You were always so strong and so brave, I thought you'd survive it all better than I could. And since Clay was your friend, I was certain he'd forgive you a lot more easily than he'd forgive me." Paige was watching Willa closely. "I had no idea Daddy would throw you out or that people would react so strongly." Paige hesitated. "If it makes

any difference, I would have come forward if Clay had decided to press charges."

Willa stared at her. She knew instinctively that she was the only one who had ever heard this confession and strongly suspected Paige would not only never repeat it, but would hereafter insist even more vigorously that Willa had been at fault.

"I don't think you would have admitted the truth even then, Paige," Willa scoffed. "If you couldn't tell your own parents the truth, I doubt you would have had the courage to face going to court and risking detention."

"My life would have been ruined," Paige snapped, dropping all pretense of contrition. "You didn't have any big ambitions. All you ever wanted to do was live on a ranch someplace like a common cowhand."

"So my future didn't count," Willa concluded grimly, then shook her head. "Cal and Tess worshiped you, Paige. I don't think there was anything they would have denied you. How is it you turned out so wrong?"

Paige's face reddened as she bent her head aside. "Just remember what I said about Mother," she warned Willa. "And don't plan to stay around too long."

Paige rose from the chair arm and swept regally from the room.

WILLA SPENT the next two days mucking out the barn and readying the loft for hay before she patched the barn roof. She'd hired a mechanic to repair the tractor, then had him take a look at her uncle's old red pickup. Getting it in good driving order had cost more than she had anticipated, but the truck was a necessity, and the price of a new one

well beyond what her aunt could afford this year.

A week later, her hat brim shading her face from the high midday sun, Willa drove the tractor and hay wagon into the barn to begin the wearing process of levering the large bales of fragrant hay she'd collected into the loft. The efficiency of the loft fork and pulley system made the job easier, but some assistance would have helped even more.

Willi thought instantly of Paige, who was up at the house either reading a magazine or in the midst of her daily aerobic workout. Just having someone drive the tractor while Willa tossed the bales on the wagon would have helped, but Paige had resisted the idea all week, her excuses ranging from not being good at driving a tractor to the negative effects of sun and wind on her complexion.

In addition to an aversion to outdoor work, Paige couldn't even prepare a decent meal. While she could subsist on lettuce leaves and cottage cheese, Willa needed something more substantial for a dawn-to-dusk workday. TV dinners and cold sandwiches were not exactly the staples of good nutrition, but Willa rarely had the time or energy to fix herself something better.

That Paige didn't try to help her in even the smallest way only increased the animosity between them. Paige's too-obvious scheme to discourage Willa into leaving was coming along so well that only her utmost self-control enabled Willa to conceal her discontent from Paige. She couldn't wait until she left for her next modeling assignment.

To top it all off, the two ranch hands Willa had interviewed the day before had turned out to be unsatisfactory. One had a criminal record and the

other had seemed too much of a know-it-all, too often criticizing his past bosses for Willa to believe he'd make a loyal, dependable employee.

There had been other calls that week in response to Willa's ad, but only three would agree to an interview. It seemed that too many people knew about the problems on the Circle H and either were looking for something with a less shaky future or were hoping for better wages than Willa could promise. And there were probably more than a few men who simply didn't want to work for Willa Ross, much less for a woman.

Willa finished putting up the hay, then started toward the house to grab a sandwich and exchange her coffee thermos for a larger one filled with ice water before she headed back to the hay pasture. She had just washed up and started to make a quick lunch, when Clay Cantrell's pickup rolled past the house, stopping midway to the barn. Willa slapped her sandwich together and left it on the counter, dashing to the basement to get Clay's handkerchief from the ironing board.

She was just coming up the stairs, when she heard Paige's throaty voice.

"She's not much more competent than Art Boles," Paige was saying. "And I don't know what she does with her time. She doesn't have much to show for it except the bills she's been running up. I wish I could convince Mother to open her eyes, but you know how sentimental she is. I just hope Willa has an attack of conscience and doesn't hurt Mom too much this time. She just couldn't take it, Clay."

Willa's cheeks were burning with fury as she stepped into the kitchen. Paige was dressed in a lilac form-fitting exercise outfit, and using it to advantage, having struck a pose calculated to look seductive. Willa felt a sharp stab

of something like jealousy as she noted what a perfect physical match Paige's brunette looks were for Clay's imposing masculinity.

"You might know a bit more about how I spend my time if you could manage to get out of bed by noon," Willa remarked coolly as she crossed to where Paige and Clay stood. "Here's your hankie," she said to Clay, then turned away and got out some waxed paper to wrap her sandwich in as Paige led Clay toward the living room.

Doing her best to ignore the flirtatious note that came into her cousin's lowered voice as her words became indistinct, Willa selected fruit and Twinkies, then, along with her sandwich, placed them in a brown paper bag. She'd carried her lunch and the thermos back out to the hay wagon when Clay caught up with her.

"You've got a section of fence down and about fifty head of cattle out," he told her.

Willa was instantly alarmed. "Where?"

"On Orion."

Willa glanced uneasily toward the cloud-mantled mountains miles to the west. "I've still got a lot of hay in the field, Clay, and it's supposed to storm tonight."

Clay's voice was hard. "Your aunt hired you to run this ranch, Willa. If you can't handle it, maybe you ought to step aside."

Willa's gaze swung back to his, her green eyes blazing. "If you think you can do as good with almost no money and no help, plus an overabundance of critics waiting for you to fail, you're welcome to try, Mr. Millionaire Rancher." She jabbed a slim finger at his chest angrily. "Until then, either run those cattle back onto the Circle H and patch the fence yourself until I can

get to it, or let them graze and send me the bill. I've got hay to get in."

With that Willa turned her back on him and climbed onto the tractor, pulling away from the barn to head down the long twin tracks that led to the hay field.

WILLA WAS too exhausted and miserable to feel angry at either Clay or her cousin as she trudged from the barn to the house that evening. Sweat-mingled hay chaff and dust had worked their way beneath her clothing all day and were now plastered to her skin by the downpour that had begun just as she'd driven the last wagon of hay from the field.

The thought of spending a good share of the day tomorrow fixing fence and rounding up cattle was too tiring for her to contemplate, and she almost regretted not hiring one of the men she'd decided was unsuitable. Willa made a mental note never to interview anyone after the kind of day she'd just put in. There was no telling what kind of person she'd get for her aunt if she gave in to desperation.

Thinking of Aunt Tess suddenly brought a pang of sadness. Willa hadn't had time to visit her much this week and it looked as if she wouldn't tonight, either. But that would have to change once Paige went on her assignment, since Tess would naturally miss her daughter's frequent visits.

When Willa stepped from the back porch into the kitchen, she noticed the folded sheet of pink stationery on the kitchen table. As she picked it up, she heard the sound of Clay's truck coming up the drive. She didn't have the energy to face him. Hurriedly, she skimmed the note informing her that Paige had gone to New York.

Relieved at that, Willa tossed down the paper and quickly closed the back door. With any luck, she could get into the shower and pretend she didn't know Clay was there.

Moments later, Willa stepped beneath the sharp needles of hot water, lathering her hair twice before going after her skin with a shower brush and soap, lingering under the hot spray.

After putting on the short terry robe she'd laid out, she quickly combed the wet tangles from her hair, then blow-dried it to a silky cloud of honey-brown that waved past her shoulders. Revived, but resigned to a frozen dinner from the freezer and the book work she'd been putting off, Willa went downstairs.

Except for the kitchen, the house was darkened, the only other light coming through the windows from the yard and an occasional flash of lightning. Willa had just reached the kitchen doorway when it registered that she hadn't turned on any lights downstairs.

"Hope you don't mind that I let myself in."

Clay's low drawl startled her as she saw him sprawled comfortably on one of the chairs at the table.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, her hand going to the loose V of her robe as Clay's dark eyes made a slow journey downward. Willa caught her breath as his gaze lingered first on the swell of her breasts, then on the slim length of thigh, knee and ankle that the short robe left uncovered. There was a pronounced glimmer of appreciation in those black eyes before they shuttered themselves and returned to her face.

"I had one or two things I wanted to talk over with you tonight."

"I'll just bet," she murmured, as she crossed the room to the large chest-

style freezer. "I'm in no mood to hear any more about how incompetent I am or how many bills I'm running up," she said, rummaging through the stack of boxed dinners.

"How old are you now, Willa? Twenty-two?"

When she realized Clay was beside her, Willa straightened abruptly, hastily yanking down the short robe. She flung an irritated glance at him and caught the unnerving blackness in his eyes.

Several charged heartbeats of time thudded between them as green eyes melded with black. Clay was too close.

Neither of them moved or spoke as outside the thunder rolled steadily toward its crescendo, neither of them quite able to look away from the other as frail tendrils of feeling wove their way between them.

Willa suddenly remembered that time at Angie's birthday party when she'd managed to maneuver Clay away from their guests. She'd been sixteen, almost seventeen.

Over Aunt Tess's objection, Willa had bought a daring little ivory halter dress with a deep V neckline and no back for Angie's party with the secret intent of bringing home to Clay just how grown-up she was.

She'd had a crush on him then, and since one or two of the schoolboys who'd been smitten with her had seemed to like kissing her, she'd decided to see if her kisses would have a similar effect on Clay.

Unfortunately the much older Clay Cantrell had made all the boys her age seem so green and shallow that she'd found kissing them not much of a thrill. Kissing Clay was to be a kind of experiment, an adventure.

"I think this is far enough," Clay had said as he caught her hand and tugged her to a halt just past the first

cluster of trees. There had been something quite intense about the way he'd looked at her then, something she'd seen only an inkling of before, and she'd felt both frightened and excited.

"You never asked me to dance tonight," she said breathlessly as she took that daring step nearer, practically forcing him to take her into his arms. When Clay obliged it seemed like the most natural thing in the world for her to reach up and place her hands on the back of his neck to draw him closer.

Amazingly, magically, Clay's firm male mouth alighted gently on hers and Willa tried to kiss him as best she knew how, thoroughly shocked when Clay showed not even a hint of the enthusiasm her boyfriends had shown. When she drew back, he chuckled at her disappointed expression, and she felt insulted. Unable to bear the thought that Clay was laughing at her, she started to pull away.

"Come back here, minx," he said in a low, rough voice as he pulled her back into his arms and held her slim resisting body against the male hardness of his. "You're too damned young to be seducing older men," he growled. "If you learn your lesson tonight, maybe you'll want to wait a couple more years before you try this again."

With that, he took her lips with a force that had almost made her faint. Indeed, she fairly melted beneath the sensual assault of his mouth. But when he pressed past her lips and invaded her mouth she became like a rag doll in his arms. When his mouth finally released hers she was too dazed to move.

"Damned if I know which of us learned the lesson" she thought she heard him mutter. Then he thrust her away from him with a rough, "You'd better get back to the party."



Willa recovered from the recollection and from somewhere found her voice. "Wh-what did you say?"

Clay didn't answer for a moment, and Willa suddenly sensed that he was going to kiss her.

But this time, he was about to kiss a woman he despised on every level, a woman whom he believed had caused his sister's death. Remembering that sobered her, and when she saw the tight anger that crossed Clay's features she knew he had remembered it, too.

The long, slow roll of thunder peaked with a crash, then ebbed into the loud drum of rain on the roof.

"How old are you, damn it?" he repeated.

"Twenty-two, going on eighty tonight," she said on an out-rush of weary breath as she pulled the freezer door closed, banishing the last of the bittersweet memory as she concentrated on something more immediate. Perhaps the next few nights she'd eat in town on her way to the hospital to visit her aunt. But tonight she'd settle for a glass of milk and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"You've taken on a lot for someone your age," Clay pointed out a bit less sternly.

Willa turned fully toward him, a wry twist to one corner of her mouth. "Well, that's life, Clay," she said in a flippant tone meant to provoke. "It rarely waits until you're old enough or smart enough. Ready or not, here it comes." Willa moved past him.

"Paige said you turned down a couple of men who came out to apply for work. Was there something wrong with them, or were you just being too choosy?"

Clay's question revealed a world of suspicion. Nettled, Willa yanked open

the refrigerator to get out milk and a jar of jelly.

"I explained to Paige why I didn't hire those men," she said. "No one would scream louder than she would have if I'd hired either one of them. But," she added, reaching for a loaf of bread, "I'm sure she figured if she gave the truth just the right little twist she could have you over here making a nuisance of yourself."

Willa turned back to make her sandwich when Clay's expression darkened. "Both men's résumés are on the desk in the den. Since you've obviously decided you're going to butt in on Circle H business, you might as well see for yourself. It's pretty clear my word still means less than nothing to you."

Thick silence filled the room. Even the storm quieted for those next few seconds. Willa worked at her sandwich, eyes blinded by the angry tears that had suddenly sluiced up from the old hurt inside.

"Well, how about it, Clay?" she prodded, unable to calm her roiling emotions as an idea came to her. "While you're at it, you might as well look over the books and see how much money I've been bleeding out of the accounts. Come on." Willa tossed down the butter knife, wiped her hands on a dish towel, then stalked down the darkened hall to the den.

She got out the ranch ledgers, scooped up the bills and receipts she'd planned to tend to that night, then thumped them down in the middle of the desk as Clay stepped into the room. She added the résumés to the stack. When she looked up, she was trembling, but pride kept her from allowing anything to show but the anger she felt.

"Come on, let's get this over with," she invited.



Clay's face was stony. "That's not necessary."

"Oh, but it is," Willa said, green eyes glittering. "I insist. It's time you learned to look at all the facts . . . and time someone called Paige's bluff." Willa gave the stack a little shove in his direction. "It's all here. Since yours is a surprise visit I haven't had time to alter any of the evidence."

When Clay still made no move to inspect the things she'd set out, Willa picked up the résumés and began reading them out loud, adding the impressions she'd formed during the interviews and her reasons for not hiring either man. Next she opened the ledgers and gave him a brief rundown of how much money there was in the accounts, before listing the expenses she'd incurred, as well as the ones she'd decided could wait.

"Added to that, I have no idea how much loss we'll show on the cattle, since the tallies at spring roundup were incomplete. Oh, I forgot," she went on acidly, "we've got only two good horses and we'll undoubtedly take another loss when the others go to auction and I have to buy replacements."

"That's enough," Clay said roughly.

"I agree," she said. "So you'll excuse me if I'm just a little slow getting things done or if it looks as if I'm spending my aunt into bankruptcy. I'll leave when I hire a couple of ranch hands and find someone competent to run the Circle H."

Clay was staring across the desk at her. "That's why I wanted to talk to you. I think I have a way to accomplish everything right away."

Willa watched him warily. "How?"

"Let me take over the search for a foreman and ranch hands. Until then, I can spare three or four of my men to come over and get things in order."

"You can see from the books that I can't afford to pay wages for that many men."

"I'll be good for the wages. Paige already agreed to take care of supplies and operating expenses, provided you leave the ranch."

Willa's lips twisted cynically. She should have known Paige was in on this. "What about Aunt Tess?"

Clay misunderstood her question. "She won't know about the wages."

"And if I go along with your idea, I could be gone by—let's say—tomorrow?" she offered.

Clay's granite expression relaxed and he nodded, clearly relieved by her response.

"You know, don't you, that Aunt Tess has plans for me to stay on," she said, already guessing that neither he nor Paige had considered how Tess would feel about her leaving so soon. "Not that I intend to," she added when Clay's eyes hardened, "but tomorrow would be a bit too abrupt, don't you think?"

"How soon do you think it could be?" he shot back, and Willa was cut to her soul by his obsession to banish her not only from his life, but from that of the only blood relative who would claim her.

"You're pretty anxious to have me gone, aren't you?" she asked, forcing her voice to remain steady.

Clay stared at her. "What do you think?"

"I think you must hate me an awful lot," she said.

Clay swore, his dark eyes suddenly glinting with pain-mingled anger. "Damn it all to hell, Willa, what do you expect?" he demanded. Then, in a more civilized voice, "What about my proposal?"

"I'll think it over, but it's only fair to tell you that I want to stay—for Aunt Tess," she said at last.

Clay's mouth slanted, and he looked away a moment as he shook his head. "I can't understand why you're doing this, Willa," he said. "You should have realized that when Tess asked you to stay on and help her, she was making more of an emotional request than a sound business decision. You're risking the loss of this ranch because you have some crazy idea that saving it is going to make up for other things...that you can't atone for. I just hope you see sense before it goes too far."

"Is that all you have to say?" Willa asked.

"That's about it."

"Then I'd appreciate it if you'd leave," she said, managing to hold Clay's gaze without flinching until he turned and strode from the room.

When she heard the back door open, then close, Willa sat down at the desk, the paperwork forgotten as a feeling of deep depression dragged at her heart.

THE WYOMING sky was a bright blue, the storm clouds of three days before long gone. The afternoon sun was hot, but the steady breeze that hummed through the pines near Angela Cantrell's grave was cooling.

Willa had put off this visit to Angie's grave site for days—years, in fact. She'd been too severely injured in the accident to attend the funeral. When she'd recovered, she hadn't felt able to come, either.

But now she was here, and her deep sense of loss was amplified by the fact that today would have been Angie's twenty-third birthday. Willa whispered a soft "Hi, Ang."

She squeezed her eyes closed and the memory of Angie became unnaturally sharp. What she saw was a seventeen-year-old girl with dark, curly hair, merry brown eyes and coltishly long legs.

"I had to come here today," she whispered at last. "It's your birthday..." Willa's voice trailed away as she looked down with tear-blurred eyes at the miniature pink roses she held in a cone of florist's tissue. "I brought you these."

Willa stepped to the headstone and suddenly the sense of Angie's presence was so real that she half expected to see her leaning on the stone, grinning down at her.

She lowered herself to the ground, sitting cross-legged at the side of the grave, any sense that she was trespassing gone. One by one, Willa separated the roses and leaned over to place them in the slim receptacle in front of the stone.

CLAY CANTRELL drove his truck beneath the scrolled iron arch that marked the entrance to the cemetery. As much as he'd wanted to ignore this anniversary, the melancholia he'd been feeling all day prevented it. Angie had loved parties and a good time and there was no way he could let her birthday go by without doing what little he could to remember it. It seemed that everything bright and fun had gone out of his life when Angie had died, and for the longest time, he'd thought the grieving would never stop. Eventually it had and he'd got over her death, but there were still times when those tender wounds were pricked. More so now that Willa was back.

The moment Clay saw Willa's car, his mouth tightened grimly. That she would visit Angie's grave angered him,

and as he drew his truck to a halt behind her car, he vowed to do something about it.

"I'M SO SORRY, Ang," Willa whispered, forehead in her hands as the tears finally broke. "I wasn't strong enough. Maybe you were already... gone... before I could get to you." For several minutes, tears of that remembered agony slid in a torrent down her cheeks. At last she raised her head and looked again at the name on the headstone, Angela Elaine Cantrell, and the dates just seventeen years apart.

The tears continued, but as the sense of uncomforted grief finally eased, Willa slowly began to feel better. Coming here had been a release, a chance to talk things over with an old friend. She drew a shaky breath, unaware of the harsh-faced man who stood just behind her. "I still miss you, Ang."

The scuff of a boot in the grass startled her and she jerked her head around.

Clay stared down at Willa's tear-ravaged face. He'd been prepared to rail at her, to challenge her right to be here, but the instant he'd heard her emotion-clogged voice and the things she was saying to Angie, something inside him had started twisting.

She was turning him inside out, forcing him to feel things he wanted to ignore. He had softened toward Willa in the three weeks she'd been here, and he hated himself for it. It wasn't right that she had survived the foolishness that had taken his kid sister's life. Everything good that Willa aroused in him somehow seemed disloyal to Angie.

Warily Willa watched the changing emotions that crossed Clay's face.

Apprehension filled her when his fingers tightened punishingly on the stems of the white lilies he held at his side. Yet when his gaze came back to meet hers, it was bleak, the shafts of pain she read there bringing a fresh sting of tears.

Neither of them said a word as Willa picked up the crumpled florist's tissue and stepped past Clay to hurry to her car.

WILLA JABBED the slender spade into the gap between the fence post and the edge of the post hole, tamping down the dirt to wedge the new post more firmly into place. At midmorning, the June sun was already hot, but Willa was thinking only of the call she'd made to Clay the night before.

"I've thought about your offer," she'd told him. "And I was wondering if you'd consider a compromise."

At Clay's gruff "What is it?" Willa tentatively accepted his offer to find a foreman and a couple of ranch hands—on the condition that she have final approval. "But until you find a foreman, I'd like to stay on. There's more than enough work to go around," she added, then waited for what felt like an eternity before Clay spoke.

"Paige's condition for providing the money for expenses was that you leave the ranch," he reminded her.

She had pressed a shaky hand against her forehead, grateful that she'd called Clay rather than gone to see him face-to-face. "I've just looked over the accounts. There's enough money to cover the outstanding expenses and supplies if I'm careful. I realize you and Paige are counting the minutes until I'm out of your lives forever," she said, "but Aunt Tess doesn't feel that way, and she wouldn't

understand if I suddenly turned everything over to you and disappeared."

A soft curse came over the line and Willa's temper flared. "If you decide you can live with my counterproposal, you can send over a couple men to help me replace that section of fence that borders Orion. Tell them to pack their own lunches if they expect to eat. I'll be starting on the fence at seven." She'd hung up the phone before Clay could agree or not.

When she'd arrived at the fence line that morning, two of Clay's men were waiting.

"I'm Frank Casey, and this here's Bill Johnson," Frank offered, and both men touched their hat brims. "The boss sent us over to give you a hand."

Willa smiled. "I appreciate your help."

The three of them had got right to work.

As Willa finished with the fence post and moved down her part of the row to the next, she caught sight of Clay's pickup heading over the rough pasture toward her and the men.

She worked on, listening to the easy sound of male voices as Clay joined his men, though she couldn't quite make out what was being said. The talking continued as she reached for the post-hole digger.

Impatient, hoping yet dreading that Clay would come her way, Willa glanced toward him, catching his eyes on her as he started in her direction.

"I sent one of my men to check on the cattle," he said.

"Thanks," she murmured, her gloved hands gripping the digger handles nervously. Clay nodded, then turned toward his truck. "Wait. There's something I need to say." Willa

watched the stern set of his face as he turned back to her.

"I shouldn't have lost my temper last night," she said on an out-rush of breath. "I can understand how anxious you are to have me gone, and I'm sure I'd feel the same way if things were the other way around.... I'm sorry my being here is...hard on you," she got out. "I plan to have the talk with Aunt Tess that I should have had days ago. I'll be ready to leave as soon as you find a foreman."

Willa glanced away, feeling awkward and more than a little sad, though she was careful not to let it show on her face.

"I've got a man in mind."

Willa's gaze shot back to Clay's as he went on. "I gave him a call this morning. He's the assistant foreman on a big ranch up by Sheridan, but he's been thinking about finding a smaller operation closer to his sister and her family in Laramie."

"I'd appreciate a chance to talk to him myself before any decisions are made," she said firmly.

Clay stared down at her, his dark eyes cold. "I'd probably agree to just about anything that got you away from here and out of our lives for good."

Willa felt herself go pale as she reeled inwardly from his words. She looked downward. "I've got work to do," she murmured, and focused the post-hole digger.

Clay didn't linger. His stride was angry and swift. He ignored his men as he crossed to the Orion side of the fence line and climbed into his truck.

With her vision beginning to blur with tears, Willa tossed down the digger, not seeing that the tip of one handle came down sharply next to a long patterned shape that slipped between a roll of new wire and the fence post she was about to pick up. The warning

rattle of the snake didn't sound until her gloved hands closed around the post.

WILLA LAY fully dressed on the hospital bed, staring at the television across the room as she waited for the chaplain to stop by and give her a ride to the Circle H. It had been almost a day and a half since Clay had carried her into the emergency room. Nurses and technicians had come at her from all directions, bathing the snakebite area, taking blood samples, doing periodic checks of her vital signs, taking her medical history and getting an account of the bite. The antivenin had been administered quickly and successfully, but because she might need more, she'd been admitted to the hospital.

Clay had stepped into the treatment area to see her before she'd been taken upstairs, but he'd stayed only long enough to learn that she was doing well. She hadn't seen him since.

Willa pressed the remote button that switched off the television. She glanced over at the wall clock, then got up, impatient to see that it was just after five. The chaplain had promised to be there by four.

She'd just started to make a call to his office when the door to her room swung open. Willa quickly hung up and turned around. "I was just—" Her smile of welcome faltered as Clay walked into the room, her overnight case in his hand.

"Feeling better?"

Clay stopped near the foot of the hospital bed, rotating the Stetson slightly on his fingers as his gaze swept over her.

"Feeling good enough to go home," she said a bit nervously. "As soon as Reverend Collins gets here."

"I spoke to him earlier," Clay told her. "If you don't mind, I'll give you that ride back to the Circle H." He held the case out to her. "I thought you'd like to stop in and see Tess first, so I picked up a change of clothes for you."

Willa looked up from the case to Clay, taken aback by the personal intrusion into her life that his actions represented. "That was... nice of you," she said awkwardly. "I'll just be a minute."

Willa changed quickly in the bathroom, a bit pink cheeked to see that Clay had also chosen a set of her laciest underwear. The white jeans he'd selected were fine for a summer evening, and the long loose sleeves of the lime blouse would easily conceal her bandaged wrist from her aunt. He'd even thought to include a few cosmetics—and Willa applied them with a light hand.

"I really appreciate this, Clay," she said when she'd stepped out. "Aunt Tess might have worried if I hadn't stopped by again tonight."

Clay took the small bag from her. "I assumed Tess hadn't been told," he said.

Clay left the case at the nurses' station; then went with Willa to Tess's room. Willa was surprised Clay was going in with her, but she didn't question him. She felt unusually tired.

"Willa!" Tess glanced past her visitor, her smile widening at the sight of Clay. "And Clay!" she added, pleased. Willa leaned over to kiss her aunt's cheek.

"Willa and I are having dinner together tonight," Clay said to Tess, and Willa felt herself reel in shock. If she hadn't sensed earlier that something between them was different, she did now.

"How are you today, Aunt Tess?" Willa asked casually, to hide her confusion. The conversation settled quickly into what the doctor had said that day and who'd been by.

Once they were out in the car, "What's come over you?" Willa demanded of Clay. "Why are you doing all this?"

Clay flashed a look in her direction that skittered away as his face hardened slightly. He pushed the key into the ignition and gave it a twist. "Let's don't ask too many questions right now," he said. "Why don't we just relax and see how things go from here?"

Willa stared at him as he backed the car smoothly from the parking space.

"You feel guilty about what you said yesterday," she concluded.

When Clay didn't have a quick answer, she sighed. She had to clarify the situation for them both.

"Look, if I'd been paying attention to what I was doing, I wouldn't have got bitten by a snake," she reasoned. "If I hadn't been bitten, you wouldn't have had an attack of conscience."

Clay made no response, and Willa went tense as he turned down a familiar street and pulled into the parking lot of the Silver Spur restaurant.

"I'm not really up to this," Willa said quickly. Her green eyes had gone shadowy and the turbulence in them communicated more fear than anger. "I mean it, Clay."

Clay studied her face for a long moment before he looked away and put the car into gear. The entire ride to the Circle H passed in silence.

"Thanks for the ride—for everything," Willa said, as Clay brought the car to a smooth stop in the drive. As she walked to the back of the car for her overnight case, Willa tried to conceal her weariness.

"I can get that," she said as he closed the trunk, but Clay shook his head and walked with her to the door. He carried her case into the kitchen and set it on the floor.

"Is there anything you need?" he asked. The sudden awkwardness between them somehow felt unnatural.

"No. Nothing."

"Then I'll head on down to the barn and take care of a few chores before I go. You should be resting," he insisted gruffly, then turned and walked out the back door.

Willa watched him go, then glanced around the kitchen. Any appetite she had was gone. Unusually weary, her legs leaden, Willa headed for the sofa in the living room.

THE NIGHTMARE was the same as always—more flashback than dream—so vivid and so eerily real that it was like being wrenched from the present.

"God, Willa, you drive like an old woman," Paige was saying. Willa had started out from the stop sign after coming to a full stop and looking both ways, but because Paige was in a hurry to get home, Willa's caution aggravated her.

Angie, sitting between the two cousins, elbowed Willa, who momentarily turned her head and grinned at her friend. They had taken Uncle Cal's new truck to town to pick Paige up from a friend's house, but it was Saturday, and Paige had a hot date that night with a college boy home on spring break. She had been a bit too full of herself all week, so naturally Willa and Angie had taken it upon themselves to have a bit of harmless fun with her.

Willa continued to obey the speed limit very faithfully, and she and An-

gie shared a secret grin or two when Paige continued to complain.

Just before they reached the edge of town, Angie started to cough. "Gosh, Willa," she said, "I could sure use something to drink." Willa had taken her cue.

"Me, too," she'd chimed in, then flipped on the signal to turn at the next corner.

"You can wait till you get home," Paige snapped, and by the time Willa pulled into the convenience store parking lot, she was fuming.

"Can we get you something, Paige?" Willa had asked solicitously.

"Just hurry up," Paige said through gritted teeth, but Angie found a way to dawdle as she started counting out all the change in her pocket.

By the time Willa and Angie had finally made their selections and come back out, Paige was behind the wheel. Figuring she'd had enough, the others climbed in docilely, Angie choosing the middle of the seat with Willa by the door.

Provoked and in a hurry, Paige had roared out of the parking lot, attempting to make up for lost time. It crossed Willa's mind that they should all put on their seat belts, but a sudden dip in the road caused her to spill her soda and she'd forgotten about the safety precaution.

A few minutes later, on the graveled back road Paige had chosen as a shortcut, the truck hit a series of washboard bumps and Paige lost control....

Willa awakened to blinding pain in her head and the strong, sickening fumes of gasoline. The truck lay upside down in the ravine a few feet from her and she moved instinctively toward it.

At first, the pain in her shoulder and arm was too great for her to crawl, but

slowly, agonizingly, she managed to use her other arm to pull herself along, the effort making her dizzy and nauseous. Paige, she'd noticed, was lying on the bank just above and behind the overturned truck, but Angie was nowhere in sight.

Wave upon wave of sickening fear washed through her, compelling her to get to Angie. From somewhere it registered that the gas tank had ruptured and fire was imminent. Sobbing, struggling, fighting back the black void that tried to claim her, Willa clawed her way to the truck, the sight she saw in the wreckage of the overturned vehicle bringing with it a cry of horror.

CLAY HEARD the odd, softly keening wail just as he was about to get into his car. When he heard the strange sound a second time, he hurried toward the house. Hesitating on the porch steps, he recognized Willa's voice. Fear gripped him as he wrenched open the door.

Willa lay on the sofa, a knee upraised as her head moved fitfully from side to side, caught up in the nightmare that had left her drenched with perspiration. Clay froze in the doorway.

"Angie, wake up."

Clay listened intently, and watched Willa struggle with the nightmare as if she were searching for something, reaching.

"Please, Angie, wake up."

A shudder coursed through his body and landed like a fist in his chest as he heard the utter desperation in Willa's voice.



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THE HANDS that shook her awake were unlike the ones that had pulled her away from the wreckage just before the truck burst into flames, but Willa fought them as she'd fought those other hands. She had to save Angie.

"No. No, don't. Angie's in there," she babbled wildly, then found herself sitting up, her fingers dug like claws into Clay's shoulders.

Clay couldn't take his eyes from her stricken face. The desolation he saw there clutched at him and he realized then what he should have realized five years before—that the accident had to have been the result of a crazy adolescent stunt gone tragically wrong. It occurred to him suddenly that it could just as easily have been Angie who'd taken that reckless chance. The tenderness that welled up inside him as he continued to hold Willa drained the last of his hostility.

"Please, just leave me alone," she said hoarsely. Too overwrought to sit still, Willa got unsteadily to her feet and walked to the west windows of the living room to stare out at the purpling sunset of the waning day. She wrapped her arms around herself, aware of the ache in her wrist and arm as she began to shiver.

"Are you all right? Willa?" The deep velvety texture of Clay's voice and its undisguised concern sent more tears flooding down her cheeks.

"I'm all right," she said briskly, then brought both hands up to brush at the wetness. "You did the chores?" she asked.

"Forget the chores," Clay said gruffly as he crossed the room and stopped inches from her. "Do you have nightmares about Angie often?"

Willa bit her lip to stifle the sob that welled up in answer. "Go away," she got out at last, then began to tremble as Clay's big hands came up and settled consolingly on her shoulders. "Please. Just go away," she whispered hoarsely, as she tried to keep from turning and throwing her arms around him to grab for every bit of comfort his actions hinted at.

Clay felt the emotional tug-of-war within Willa only because his own war of emotions had been so acute. Compassion filled his heart.

"Not just yet, Willa," he said quietly, then turned her toward him and took her into his arms. "It's all right, Willa. It's all over," Clay soothed as he held her trembling body and let her cry. She felt as fragile as a small child in his arms and Clay couldn't help the protectiveness he felt toward her as he gathered her closer and led her to the large rocking chair beside the windows.

It was some time later, when the room had gone completely dark, that the tears finally stopped. Clay's arms were still tight around her and Willa savored the security of his closeness.

"Angie had her share of nightmares when she was little," Clay began, his deep voice a pleasant rumble against her chest. "Her favorite cure was the rocking chair." Clay continued to rock, stroking Willa's cheek.

At the mention of Angie's name, Willa went tense. Clay softly ordered her to relax.

"She was my best friend, Clay," Willa whispered. "I wouldn't have put her life in danger for anything in the world." Behind her words was the plea for Clay to believe at last that she hadn't caused the accident that had killed his sister. She couldn't tell him the truth outright because it would devastate Aunt Tess. She could only

hope he would somehow realize it anyway.

Clay lowered his hand to rub her arm. "I know, Willa," he said huskily, and her heart gave a glad leap.

"You do?" she asked, the hope inside her swelling.

Clay's dark eyes were utterly serious. "You were just a kid," he said softly. "A kid who pulled a foolish stunt. I know you didn't mean for Angie to die."

Willa stared helplessly at him as disheartened tears swam into her eyes. He still didn't understand. Willa turned her face away and made a move to get up, but Clay didn't release her.

"I don't think Angie would be too pleased with the way things have been between us since then."

Willa couldn't look at Clay for a moment. When she did, she saw a tenderness and affection in his expression that surprised her.

"Angie would have wanted us to stay friends," he said. "I can see that now." Clay's fingers moved in slow circles on her back as he gripped her waist. "If there's a way to put the past five years behind us and start fresh, maybe we ought to try. What do you say?"

Willa was suddenly overcome with bittersweet emotion. Clay was forgiving her for something she hadn't done, yet offering her a reconciliation she'd not believed possible. Fearful of somehow jeopardizing this truce, no matter how imperfect it was, Willa nodded slowly, bringing a trembling hand to Clay's jaw in a quick, shy caress. "All right," she murmured, watching his eyes for any hint of insincerity.

"Good." His smile eased Willa's uncertainty. "I think it would be a good idea to start off on a full stomach. How about supper?"

Willa was too choked to answer for a moment as she sensed the first tendrils of renewed friendship.

"Let me have some time to freshen up and I'll see what's in the kitchen," she said as she slid off Clay's lap. Clay's hand caught hers.

"Take your time. I'll see to supper," he said.

Willa lingered nervously in her bathroom, having splashed her face with cool water before she lightly reapplied a bit of makeup. She could hear Clay in the kitchen and was reluctant now to join him. No one had ever seen her as he just had, and she felt uncomfortably exposed. She waited as long as she dared before heading downstairs.

To her relief, Clay was standing with his back to her as she entered the kitchen.

"Still like your eggs over easy?" he asked.

"Over easy is fine," she answered.

"You don't mind bacon and eggs for a late supper, do you?" Clay asked as he watched her set the table.

"As long as it's someone else's cooking, I could eat just about anything but a TV dinner," she replied.

"I take it you don't like to cook."

"I don't get a lot of practice," she said without thinking. Alarmed at the bit of information she'd just given away, Willa glanced down at the flatware. Most larger ranches had a cook to prepare meals for the ranch hands. Clay would never guess that the cook on the D & R worked for Willa.

"I never did hear where it is you've been working the past few years," Clay said.

Willa was instantly alert. She didn't want anyone here poking into the secure life she'd made for herself in Colorado. "I've worked several places," she answered noncommit-

tally. "Mostly Kansas, Colorado..." She shrugged.

"Paige said you've worked with horses," Clay persisted.

"I prefer working with horses," she told him evasively before changing the subject. "There's some orange juice concentrate in the freezer. Want me to make it up?"

Clay didn't ask her any more questions, but Willa caught his speculative gaze on her several times and sensed his curiosity. She forgot all about it, however, when they sat down to bacon, eggs and toast, and the oven buzzer sounded.

"I saw the mix for this in the cupboard and thought it sounded good." Clay gingerly removed a pan of brownies from the oven, with the help of a tiny crocheted pot holder.

"They look wonderful," Willa commented, doing her best to suppress a smile as he flung the pot holder down and settled on his chair.

Clay caught the emerald sparkle in Willa's eyes and did a double take. It had been a long time since he'd seen anything in her of the impish, carefree adolescent he'd been so powerfully attracted to—and he suddenly ached to see her that way again.

Willa watched the darkening of Clay's eyes with more than a little apprehension. He was staring at her so intently that she felt as if the midnight black of his gaze would swallow her whole. Alarmed at the erratic skittering of her pulse, Willa fled the contact with Clay. She hastily lifted a fork of fried egg to her mouth and tried to chew normally, unnerved beyond belief.

"I've arranged to have the horses you planned to sell taken to the stock auction at the Cascade fairgrounds tomorrow," Clay said to break the un-

comfortable silence between them as they finished their meal.

Willa glanced up, the flash of irritation she felt melding into a feeling of inevitability. No matter what she thought was changing between them, Clay was still determined to hurry her departure. Suddenly she didn't feel like resisting him. "Sounds good," she answered.

"You don't think I was out of line?" he asked.

Willa managed a thin smile. "Do you want an argument?"

"I might."

Willa pushed back her chair and stood to clear the table. "If you make any more arrangements for the Circle H without consulting me first, you'll probably get one." Willa got out the dish soap and started running the water, but Clay nudged her aside, handing her a towel.

"You don't want to get that bandage wet," he pointed out, and nodded toward her wrist. "I'd like to have a look at that before I go."

Willa shrugged. "It's still a little sore, but it's fine."

After the dishes were done, Clay reached for her left hand and gently pushed her sleeve up. Willa was stunned by the myriad sensations his touch set off as he tenderly inspected the area around the bandage. Though her wrist still ached, there was no sign of further swelling or discoloration, which the doctor had cautioned her to watch for.

"Will you be all right alone tonight?" Clay asked as he continued to hold her hand.

Willa looked up, her senses careening at his nearness as the sensual attraction she'd been fighting came charging through her system.

"I don't know why not," she answered, but slowly, as though the mo-

ment were frail, he pulled her against him. Willa stared at his shirtfront, frightened at what she sensed was coming. Contact with the male heat of Clay's body sent a tingling weakness through her and her eyes drifted closed as he placed a lean, callused finger beneath her chin and lifted her face.

"We can't," she pleaded softly, as she felt Clay's lips brush hers in a feather-light caress.

"Some things are inevitable, Willa," he whispered as his mouth continued to move enticingly across hers. "You can fight them only so long."

Willa's hands slipped around Clay's middle and locked behind his back as his arms tightened on her waist. With each caressing stroke of his mouth, something wild was being ignited inside her, demanding fulfillment no matter what the cost.

Suddenly terrified, Willa managed to evade his lips, and pressed her flushed cheek against his neck. "We have to stop," she whispered. "Please, Clay."

"All right," he relented and gradually loosened his hold. "Maybe we are rushing things." Clay's hands lingered at her waist.

Willa shook her head. "This shouldn't be happening between us at all, Clay. It can't." Besides, there's no real trust between us. *And there never can be, as long as you believe Paige,* her heart added silently.

"I'll be over for the horses before ten tomorrow. My men are taking care of most everything else, so you might as well sleep in." Clay hesitated. "Good night."

Willa's voice went husky with the mad swirl of emotions engulfing her. "Good night, Clay."

NEXT DAY at the auction, Clay rode each of the horses into the ring. Though all four sold for less than she'd hoped, each one went to a different local bidder.

"I thought we agreed I'd do all the work," Clay reminded her later when she joined him at the holding pens to help carry the saddles back to the trailer.

"It doesn't look like you left any," she remarked as he hefted one of the last two saddles to his shoulder and let the other dangle from his fingers at his side. Willa gathered up the bridles he'd draped over the fence and followed him to the trailer.

"Didn't you see anything you'd like to bid on?" he asked.

"Nothing special," she said with a shrug. "I think I'd rather shop around and buy something privately."

"I've got a couple of four-year-olds I might consider selling," Clay told her. "Nothing fancy, but they're sound and they've been worked some. I can show them to you later on today if you're up to it."

"Sounds good," Willa said, forcing a smile to her lips. It was hot standing in the sun and the dust. She wasn't used to feeling tired in the middle of the day. Now she started around the trailer to the passenger side of the truck and got in, sighing as she tugged off her hat and leaned her head back.

"Are you ready to get that dressing changed?" Clay asked as he climbed in, his dark eyes flicking down to her bandaged wrist, which rested on her thigh.

"I think I'd rather have some lunch first," she answered, "and since you refused to let me pay you for trailering and showing the horses, it'll be my treat."

"Your treat, huh?" Clay grinned. "How about that little steak house over on the highway?"

WILLA STOOD next to Clay in the elevator, relieved to be going home. After having her dressing seen to at the hospital, they had stopped to visit Aunt Tess. One look at the deep lines of worry and concern on her aunt's face told Willa she had found out about the snakebite, and Willa had spent the entire visit trying to allay her fears.

"Thanks for helping me with Aunt Tess," Willa murmured. "She listens to you."

"It's not that she doesn't listen to you, Willa," Clay said as they stepped out. "She was worried. She's laid up and couldn't help you. Plus she probably figures she was the one who put you in harm's way in the first place."

"I can't stand the thought of her worrying," Willa said.

Clay's hand slid around her waist and brought her against his side as they walked down the corridor and Willa's arm instinctively found its way around Clay's lean middle in response.

"Tess is getting stronger every day. Besides, she's going to have to learn to deal with upsets without letting them affect her health."

"But this is too soon for her," Willa insisted.

"It's been almost four weeks, Willa," he reminded her. "She's going to be released within two or three days."

"But you saw how tired she looked—and the way her hands were shaking...."

"I saw," Clay agreed. "She looked just the way you do now—tired, worked up... and about to cry."

Startled at the observation, Willa pursed her lips and struggled to control her emotions.

The ride out of town passed in companionable silence. Neither spoke until they approached the turnoff to Orion.

"You still up to looking at those horses?"

"Might as well," she answered.

In only a few minutes one of Clay's men had brought up the two horses and put them into a corral. After Willa had looked over both sorrels, Clay had them saddled and taken to a small pasture where a half-dozen cows and their calves waited. She watched thoughtfully as two of his men worked the bunch, gathering, roping, then separating out a calf or two to show each horse's abilities.

"I thought you said they were nothing fancy," Willa said, clearly satisfied with both animals.

"I meant that they don't have the flash and the polish of the kind of horses you're used to."

Willa felt a tremor of alarm go through her at his words. She turned her head and glanced at Clay, catching the glimmer of interest in his dark eyes. "What makes you think that?" she asked.

"Tess said you worked for a big horse breeder in Colorado."

"Not so big," she said dismissively. "What kind of price are you looking to get?"

Clay named a price that made her frown.

"That's way too low, Clay. I can't let you just give them to me."

"I won't be 'giving' them to you. I'll be 'giving' them to the Hardings."

Willa chafed at the not-so-subtle reminder that Clay was only doing business through her, not with her. Then

she quickly named a price she felt was fairer.

Clay released an impatient sigh, then reached up to readjust his hat before he tugged it down to a determined angle over his eyes. "This is no time to be stubborn, Willa."

Willa took a deep breath and shook her head, her eyes coming back to meet Clay's. "I can't pay you any less than my offer. If you won't take it, then I guess we won't be doing business today."

Clay didn't reply. His expression hardened and the soft light went out of his eyes as he glanced over her head toward where his men waited with the horses.

"Miss Ross will be buying both horses, Ed," he called out. "Go ahead and load them in the trailer and take them to the Circle H."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to ride over with your men," Willa told him. "I'll send your check back with them later."

Clay's gaze swung back to hers, the hardness lingering. "I was hoping you'd stay to supper."

Willa shook her head, suddenly determined to flee the ill-fated attraction she felt for him. "It's been a long day, Clay. I'd just like to go home."

"Then I'll take you in the car. Give me a minute," he said.

CLAY FOLLOWED her into the house, handing her the papers for the horses as she seated herself at the desk in the den to write out the check. She had just finished signing her name, when the telephone shrilled.

"Circle H. Deke? How're things going?" she asked as she smiled, the call obviously welcome.

Clay watched the weariness disappear from Willa's face. The warm af-

fection in her voice was something he hadn't heard in years.

"Is the boss lady back from Saint Louis?" she asked, making a veiled reference to her partner, Ivy. "She did? Good. I was hoping she'd have a look at that one." Another pause. "I don't know yet. She'll be home soon, but I haven't hired anyone."

The room went still enough for Clay to hear faintly the deep masculine voice coming across the line.

"You miss me, huh?" Willa asked. "No, don't send anyone up. It would complicate things here." Willa glanced toward Clay. "Aunt Tess's neighbor has a lead on a foreman, and once he's hired, someone local will turn up to apply for the ranch hand positions."

Willa's eyes slid from Clay's as she gave her attention to Deke. "Anything else?" She ended the conversation and hung up. Clay's eyes were fixed on her with telling intensity.

"This Deke sounds a little eager for you to get back to Colorado."

"He's the foreman of the ranch where I work," she answered truthfully.

"Is that all he is to you?"

Willa tore the check out of the ledger-size pad. "He's also a very good friend," she added as she passed him the check.

Clay barely glanced at it. "Which ranch is it you work on down there?"

Willa closed the check pad and stood to lock it in one of the metal cabinets behind the desk. "Just a small one. You've probably never heard of it."

"Try me."

"I'd rather not," she said firmly. "Your men should be here anytime now," she said, heading around the desk. "I need to go out and—"

Clay caught her arm gently as she stepped past him. "You haven't even told Tess, have you?" he concluded.

gruffly. "What little she knows, she's had to guess. Isn't that right?" Willa made a slight move to test the firmness of his grip. Clay lowered his voice. "Why, Willa? Why don't you trust either of us enough to answer such a simple question?"

"Why don't you trust me enough to leave it alone?" she shot back, resenting the guilt Clay made her feel.

"I thought things had changed between us."

"Not everything," she burst out, then instantly regretted the words.

"Care to explain that?"

"No, I don't," she told him coolly.

"Now if you don't mind..."

"I *do* mind," Clay growled as his thumbs began to rub in calming circles on her arms. "But it doesn't look like it'll do me any good," he added, as he allowed her to pull away and take a step back.

It distressed her that she couldn't seem to reveal to him something as small as the details of her life in Colorado. Yet if Paige found out about the D & R through something Clay might say, Willa was certain her cousin would use the information against her. She couldn't bring herself to take the risk until she felt more secure about the reconciliation with Clay.

"How soon can you get that man from Sheridan down here for an interview?" she asked briskly.

"I'll give him a call tonight," Clay replied.

Willa nodded her satisfaction. "Good. Please do that. If he seems a good chance at all, I'll hire him."

"But I'm not exactly sure I want you to hurry back to Colorado."

Willa was stunned at the impact those few words had on her emotions as Clay moved forward into the short space between them. His hands came up to rest on her waist.

"And I wasn't prying into your life down there in order to make trouble. It's just that there are a lot of things I don't know about you that I want to."

Slowly, as if giving her those scant moments to adjust, Clay lowered his head and touched his lips to hers. The tiny explosion of desire that burst deep inside her at the tender force of his mouth spread through every part of her until her entire being ached with longing. And when Clay suddenly crushed her to him, Willa's arms came up and locked around his neck. The fierceness of their feelings left them both breathless when Clay finally dragged his lips from hers.

"I've wanted to do that all day," he rasped, appearing to struggle for self-control. Willa's sound of agreement brought his mouth back to hers with a pleased groan. Neither of them heard the slam of the porch door or the rapid clatter of heels across the kitchen, quickly muffled by the carpet in the hall.

Paige's belatedly called "Anybody home?" caught them both by surprise as she burst into the den.

Startled, Willa drew back and broke off the kiss, but Clay didn't release her.

Near the doorway, Paige stood frozen at the sight of them in each other's arms. Alarm and uncertainty showed on her lovely features before she seemed to recover herself.

"Well, well." Paige's voice was a bit more shrill than normal. "It looks as if the black sheep has managed to work her way back into the fold, after all."

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THE NEXT TWO days were predictably difficult as Willa tried to adjust to both Paige's presence in the house and her aunt's release from the hospital.



Aunt Tess's earlier plans to stay with her friend Mabel Asner in town had changed and she would be returning to the Circle H directly. Willa guessed Tess had wearied of her overbearing friend's frequent visits to the hospital and now had second thoughts about staying with her. The fact that Paige was planning to be home for at least the next several days had probably given Tess a polite excuse to turn down Mabel's hospitality.

Not one to be easily thwarted, Mabel accompanied Tess home, anyway, putting a damper on the cheerful event for Willa.

"Willa ought to be able to take care of the heavy housework and cooking," Mabel was saying to Tess as Willa carried a couple of the plants her aunt had received in the hospital into the living room, where the two women were sitting with Paige. Paige cast Willa a catty look as Mabel babbled on. "She's supposed to be hiring men to work outside. No reason for her to leave all the inside work to Paige."

Willa gritted her teeth at Mabel's critical, ill-informed comment.

"Willa's doing so much for me now, Mabel," Tess spoke up, "I don't know how I could ask her for another thing."

Willa returned the fond smile Tess sent her way, then started back out to her car for another armload of her aunt's things. To her relief, Mabel was just getting up to leave as she came back in. She glanced over at Paige. "Come along with me a moment, would you, dear? I'd like to talk to you," she said, her intent for privacy clear as she hustled past Willa.

*I'll just bet*, Willa thought unkindly as Paige rose gracefully to follow Mabel to her car.

"Lord in heaven, that woman's a busybody!" Tess exclaimed the moment the door closed. "I don't know

how I could have ever entertained the idea of staying with her. I would have gone crazy for sure."

Willa burst out laughing at Tess's vehemence.

"And I'm sorry she was so rude to you. I'll have a talk with her about that later." Tess braced a thin hand on the arm of the sofa and got carefully to her feet. Willa reached over to assist her, but Tess waved her away. "Now don't you fuss, young lady." Tess's gray eyes came up to meet Willa's. "Just give me a hug."

Willa hugged her aunt, the taste of sentimental tears in her mouth. "Welcome home, Aunt Tess," she murmured, pressing a light kiss on her pale cheek.

"Welcome home to you," Tess responded, then drew back to take Willa's face in her hands. "I want you to know how happy I am to have you home again—how proud I am of you. You've grown up to be just as lovely and capable a girl as I always thought you would."

Willa was too choked to speak, grateful when her aunt gave her another hug and she didn't have to.

"And now I'm afraid I do need a nap," Tess admitted as she turned to head for her bedroom at the back of the house.

Willa started toward the kitchen, but hurried into the den as the telephone began to ring.

"Did you get Tess settled in?" Clay's voice came over the line, his brisk tone making her stiffen a bit. At her quick answer, he went on. "I just wanted to let you know that Phil Spencer from Sheridan is with me and he'll be available anytime after three for an interview and a look around the Circle H."

PHIL SPENCER was a short, sturdily built man of forty whose likable personality enhanced his experience and qualifications. He impressed Willa as a good choice for a foreman. By the time she'd finished giving him a tour of the ranch, she'd decided to hire him. She had only to talk salary and tell him the job was his if he wanted it. They were just getting settled in the den, when Paige came in.

"We haven't been introduced yet," Paige said, turning on her best practiced smile.

"Phil, this is my cousin, Paige Harding," Willa said. "Paige, Phil Spencer." With the introductions out of the way, Willa intended getting rid of Paige. "Phil and I will be finished in here in just a few more minutes," she prompted.

But Paige perversely went over and seated herself behind the desk, her officious manner as she took up Phil's résumé and letters of reference making Willa cringe.

Willa tried again. "Phil and I still have some things to talk over, Paige. I think we'd both be more comfortable with a little privacy."

Paige fixed Willa with an icy stare. "I'd like to interview Phil myself, if you don't mind," she said, then scanned the papers before her.

"Go ahead and have a seat, Phil." Willa gestured to one of the wing chairs in front of the desk, resigned to Paige's interference. If Phil took the job, he'd likely be exposed to a lot of meddling from Paige, so he might as well experience it firsthand before any agreements were reached.

"On the basis of this résumé and these recommendations, I'd say you're just the man I'm looking for," Paige remarked. "How soon could you start?"

Willa shifted in her chair, irritated that Paige was usurping her authority. "Phil and I still have a few more things to discuss before either of us makes a final decision," Willa said.

"Discuss whatever you think you have to, Willa." Paige walked around the desk to shake Phil's hand. "But as far as I'm concerned, Mr. Spencer is our new foreman. I look forward to having someone competent around to take care of things for Mother and me."

WILLA RODE the sorrel gelding to the top of the rise and reined him to a walk, scanning the network of corrals and ranch buildings of Orion in the distance.

She'd needed a hard ride after her latest no-win confrontation with Paige. That she also needed to see Clay again was something she didn't let herself dwell on.

Earlier, Paige had come to the den determined to go over the books—supposedly to familiarize herself with what was going on. She had dragged everything from the cabinet there, haphazardly strewing ledgers and papers about. She'd then demanded that Willa not only explain it all to her, but also account for every cent she'd spent so far—an accounting Paige had challenged and criticized at every turn. Easily recognizing Paige's sudden interest for the harassment it was, Willa had finally given up trying to appease her, placed everything back in the cabinet, and left the house.

Willa guided the sorrel toward the final gate from the pasture. Careful to secure it behind her, she urged the horse toward the lane that led to the back of Clay's house.

"It's been a long time since I've seen you ride in like that," Clay remarked

as he watched her dismount and walk toward the patio.

"It has been a while, yes," she answered softly.

Clay sat on a cedar lounge with his feet up, his long, denim-clad legs stretched out and crossed casually at the ankles. With a lazy expression on his face and a cold beer in his hand, he was the picture of relaxation. Willa couldn't help but smile.

"You look like one of those beer commercial cowboys."

"And you're a sight for sore eyes," he said huskily. "Tell me, whatever happened to that little dress you wore to Angie's birthday party that time?"

Taken aback by the question, Willa flushed, knowing exactly which dress he was talking about.

Clay chuckled. "You were a mischief back then, Willa," he said. "Care for a cold one?" he offered. "I might even have some wine cooler."

Willa shook her head. "Not now, thanks."

"Then come on over and sit down."

Willa nudged a padded cedar chair closer to Clay's lounge and sat down, tugging off her hat and leaning back, suddenly feeling relaxed. This is what it would be like, she mused, if they could be here together for the rest of their lives; the end of a workday could be this peaceful, this companionable.

"What's it been, a week since we saw each other last?" Clay asked.

She'd not seen him since before her aunt had come home from the hospital and it was two days since she'd met with and hired Phil Spencer, but she'd barely talked to Clay since then.

Willa shook her head. "It's only been about four days."

"Have you been avoiding me?"

"I've been a little busy," she said. Then she added, "I did call to tell you about hiring Phil."

"But you haven't returned any of my calls since then."

Willa's face showed her surprise. "Which calls?"

"I don't suppose Paige told you I stopped by yesterday, either," he said, "when you were out checking cattle."

The anger and frustration she'd managed to forget for awhile came rushing back. "It must have slipped her mind, what with Tess home and all," Willa said.

"I'd hate to have to get along on the kind of memory Paige seems to have," he commented. "You two are still having problems getting along in the same house, aren't you?"

Willa's gaze streaked from his knowing expression. "It won't be for much longer. Either she'll go back to New York or I'll be heading back to Colorado."

"I thought you understood that I didn't want you to rush off."

"I've got a couple of more weeks before Phil Spencer takes over," she pointed out. "That's not exactly rushing off. And I have a job to get back to," she said quietly.

"There are other jobs, Willa. If you're any good at all with horses, you could get on just about anywhere."

"I'm happy doing what I do now," she said carefully, unable to quite bring herself to tell Clay about her ranch.

"Two weeks isn't a lot of time."

The slow smile that slanted his mouth moved through her like an electric charge as he swung his feet over the side of the lounge to bring himself face-to-face with her.

"Time?" she asked, her voice breathless. "For what?"

"For us to explore the feelings between us." Willa's breath caught as Clay reached out and enveloped her hand in the hard warmth of his before

he stood and pulled her to her feet. "Come on inside with me, Willa."

She froze for a moment, unable to follow Clay inside to what she instinctively understood would bring them closer to sexual intimacy.

"Willa?" Clay's voice was coaxing as he gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I knew a precocious little girl once who wasn't afraid of anything."

Willa's pulse quickened at the affection behind his words. "I think there's a lot more at stake here than that precocious child ever considered," she said.

One side of Clay's mouth slipped up a notch in approval. "I'm glad she's grown up enough to realize it."

Willa's resistance melted as she searched Clay's tender expression. The love she'd always felt for him swelled her heart to the bursting point and she could no more have turned away and gone home than she could have stopped breathing. A feeling of inevitability stole sweetly over her as she walked with him to the sliding glass doors that led from the patio into the house.

"I'd better call down to Frank and have him see to your horse," he said once they were inside, and she waited as he stepped into the kitchen and made the call. "You think you'd be interested in some supper?"

"Are you?" she asked, not wanting to admit that supper was the last thing on her mind.

"Not particularly," he replied. "Can I get you that wine cooler now?" he asked as he opened the liquor cabinet. "Unless you'd rather have a mixed drink."

"How about scotch?" she replied quietly, opting for something strong.

Clay's brows arched. "Don't tell me you're in need of a little false courage?" he chided.

Willa slid her hands into her jeans pockets. "Something like that."

Clay poured the drinks and passed Willa her scotch. "To us, Willa," he pronounced softly as their glasses touched in a toast.

Willa couldn't pull her eyes away from the smoky sensuality in Clay's dark gaze as she sipped her drink.

"Better?" he asked after she'd had a second sip.

"Much," she replied with a smile. Clay reached out and traced her jaw lightly.

"You aren't in any hurry to get home tonight, are you?" he asked.

"No," she said.

"That's good." Willa's breath caught as Clay gently took her glass and set it next to his own on the mantel. "Cause you know something, Willa?" he asked as he took hold of her fingers and pulled her closer. "If you're only going to give me a couple of weeks to change your mind about moving north, I think I'd like to put this time to better use." His midnight-dark eyes kindled with the fire of intent as he placed her hands on his chest, then reached down to grip her waist.

Slowly he lowered his head and brushed her lips lightly with his own. "You know how much I care for you, don't you?" he rasped. "I can't let you just run off."

Clay's mouth glided to her ear. He took his time there before he pressed a series of light lingering kisses on the delicate spot just beneath it that robbed her body of strength. Before she realized what he was doing, he leaned down and hooked his arm behind her knees to lift her gently against his chest.

Faintly startled, Willa opened desire-weighted lashes to the burning lights that shone in his dark eyes. Un-

derstanding flickered between them and Willa made no sound of protest when Clay started for the hall that led to the master bedroom.

When he stopped at the edge of the bed, he lowered her to her feet, his mouth reclaiming hers for a fiery kiss that shocked and inflamed them both. When his lips finally released hers Willa could barely do more than cling to him.

With a slowness that served only to escalate the deep longing between them, Clay began at the open neckline of Willa's blouse, unfastening a button, then leaning down to kiss the bit of flushed skin he exposed before bringing his mouth up to graze leisurely over the silken skin of her neck. Steadily his hand moved downward, until Willa was forced to grip his shoulders tighter to keep her balance, so overwhelmed was she by the rippling tides of sensation that quaked through her.

"Willa?" Clay's voice was rough with emotion as he parted the facings of her blouse to gently caress her lace-clad breasts. Willa heard the unasked question and felt everything within her strain to answer as she opened her eyes and looked up at him.

This was the man she would love for the rest of her life. The feelings she'd had for him years ago had survived the very worst and had somehow been resurrected into something much deeper than infatuation. The love she felt for him was as vital to her as her own heartbeat, and if she couldn't do something to express it now, she wasn't certain she'd be able to live with herself.

Still, there was more than a little fear inside her, fear that made her drop her eyes from the passionate turbulence in his.

Unable to say what she felt or to verbalize her consent, she instead trailed her fingers over the muscle and sinewed lines of his wide shoulders and down his shirtfront. The pearly snaps of his Western shirt gave easily to her slow, deliberate little tugs, which exposed his hair-rough chest and lean middle, until she was able to pull his shirt from his waistband and slide it off. Her eyes crept up to his. She was thrillingly aware that his fingers were moving a bit more urgently on her and that his breathing was erratic.

Clay's eyes were black with passion and desire as he pushed her blouse back and drew her sleeves down her arms to fall to the floor. Willa felt the slight tremor of his fingers when they returned to the front of her bra and gently worked the catch to free her breasts. Her eyes drifted closed in ecstasy as the sweet abrasion of his callused fingertips was followed shortly by the warmth of his mouth.

"I want you, Willa," he breathed against her, his voice gruff as she ran her hands over the sculpted flesh of his shoulders and back, reveling in the solid male feel of him.

Willa didn't realize Clay had guided her backward until her legs touched the side of the mattress. He lowered her to the bed, then followed her down, his lips reclaiming hers as he lay beside her and slid his hard thigh possessively over hers.

"I want you, too," she managed to whisper, as Clay's lips slid off hers to nibble their way down her neck to her breast. He had just begun to toy with one rosy crest, when the telephone beside the bed jangled.

Without hesitation, Clay reached over and flicked off the bell as he continued to lavish her with attention. Willa couldn't touch him enough, her hands combing through the lushness of

his hair and tracing the grooved line of his spine as he teased her nearer the unknown.

Nothing in the world mattered to her except this man and the deep compelling need she had for him.

Clay had just lowered his hand to the snap of her jeans, when a loud hammering began at the other end of the house. Neither of them responded at first, so thick was the sensual haze that surrounded them. Only when the pounding began a second time did Clay show any interest in dealing with it. With a soft curse, he levered himself away from her and got up to grab his shirt.

Willa reached for her discarded blouse before she sat up and covered herself, her cheeks tinged with shy color.

"I won't be long," Clay promised. "Wait for me?"

Willa nodded and watched him stride out as the urgent pounding began again. It was when she heard the low murmur of male voices that an uneasiness began to penetrate her sensual euphoria. Sensing something was wrong, she quickly got dressed.

She had just stepped out into the hall, when she heard Clay coming through the house. He slowed when he saw her, his face grim.

"It's Aunt Tess, isn't it?" she asked, as she clutched his muscular forearms.

Clay's grip tightened. "Yes, honey," he said. "It's Tess."

"I've got to get home," Willa said.

Clay nodded. "I'll take you."

"How COULD YOU just ride off and not let anyone know where you were going or when you'd be back?" Paige demanded in an angry tone, careful to keep her voice low. "Mother was cer-

tain you'd been thrown or that you'd been bitten by another snake."

Willa was instantly alarmed. "Was that what upset her?" she asked.

"What do you think?" Paige tossed her dark mane of hair. "You're going to be the death of her yet."

"That's enough." Clay's voice was hard.

Paige was startled. "I can't believe you're defending her."

"And I can't believe you'd hold Willa responsible for this. You're way out of line, Paige."

Paige's cheeks reddened. "I'm not out of line. You just wait. She'll show her true colors one of these days."

Willa shivered at the dark glimmers of promise in Paige's eyes. "I think I'd like to see Tess now," she murmured, escaping into the hallway. Not finding Tess in the living room, Willa hurried to her aunt's bedroom.

Tess was sitting up on her bed, her eyes closed, the family Bible open on her lap.

Unable to tell whether her aunt was awake or napping, Willa hesitated in the doorway, about to back quietly away and leave when Tess spoke.

"Willa?" Tess's soft gray eyes opened and she turned her head toward her niece. "Land sakes, child, what a look you're giving me." Her tired smile broadened. "But, then, I guess you're about as big a worrier as I am."

Willa stopped at the edge of the bed, taking the hand Tess held toward her.

"How are you feeling, Aunt Tess?"

"A lot better now. Just a little tired," she said. Then she added, "Sit with me a while?"

"Of course." Willa sat down on the edge of the mattress, then began gently, "I'm sorry I just rode off earlier. I didn't mean to worry you."

"Worry me?" Tess asked. "Who told you that?"

Hesitant to name Paige, Willa avoided answering. "That wasn't what upset you?"

Tess gave a short chuckle. "If I worried every time you got on a horse and rode off, they'd have to lock me up in a straitjacket." A look of comprehension crossed her face and she released a long, tired sigh. She murmured something soft that Willa didn't quite catch.

"What was that?" Willa asked.

"Paige and I got into a little argument earlier and I was fool enough to let it bother me." Tess gave her hand a squeeze. "I hate it when Paige and I disagree. She's the best thing Cal and I ever accomplished together, you know."

Tess's words brought a pang to Willa, but she managed not to show it as her aunt continued.

"And you know how emotional I let myself get. Doc Elliot warned me about becoming too worked up. It was no one's fault but mine and I don't want you to give it another thought, you hear?"

"All right," Willa said, able to relax now.

"Now that we've settled that," Tess said, "maybe we ought to talk about just where it was you took off to so late."

Willa couldn't suppress a smile. "I rode over to Orion."

"Good. Are the two of you on as good terms these days as I think you are?"

"So far," Willa hedged.

Tess grinned, her earlier tiredness fading. "Are you in love with him?"

Willa didn't hesitate. "Yes."

Tess patted her hand, her gleeful look making her seem years younger. "And does he love you?"

Willa's smile wavered. "I hope," she said softly.

Tess leaned over and gave her a hug. "He feels a lot for you, honey, that's certain. And there's no question the two of you are suited to each other." She gave Willa a searching look. "I don't think I need to tell you how much I'd like to see the two of you together. I think the world would finally come right for you both."

"I hope you're right," Willa whispered.

Tess gave her another hug, then leaned back against the pillows. "You just run along now and don't fret."

"All right, Aunt Tess." Willa stood up. "Good night."

"Good night, Willa."

Willa stepped out into the hall and eased the door partway closed, glancing toward her aunt one last time before she made her way back to the kitchen. To her relief, Clay was alone, sipping a cup of coffee.

"How is she?"

"She seems fine... a little tired," Willa answered. "Where's Paige?"

"She took off in her car a few minutes ago."

Willa heard the smile in Clay's voice and turned toward him. "I take it she wasn't too pleased about something."

"Someone would be more like it," he said as he set his coffee cup aside and reached over to pull her into the circle of his arms. Without giving her a chance to protest, he bent his head and seized her lips with a hunger that made confetti of her thoughts. When he finally broke off the kiss, they were both trembling.

"I think it would be a good idea if I headed on home," Clay said as he eased her away from him. "No telling what kind of spell your aunt would have if she came out to the kitchen a few minutes from now."



THE WEEK sped by quickly as Willa worked to prepare the bunkhouse not only for Phil Spencer, but for the two ranch hands Clay had found for her. The future of the Circle H looked far brighter now, and Willa was pleased with the way things were going.

Clay stopped over nearly every day and they went out together almost every night, which never failed to distress her cousin. Yet as the days rapidly advanced toward Phil Spencer's arrival, Willa awoke each morning to the niggling reminder that he would soon be taking over the Circle H and that Clay and her aunt expected her to reach a decision about staying on. Neither of them knew about her part-ownership of the ranch in Colorado, and the longer Willa put off telling them about it, the harder she was finding it to do so.

As it turned out, however, whatever sense of guilt Willa had felt about keeping so closemouthed about the D & R was swept suddenly away the day before Phil Spencer was to arrive.

Willa finished briskly rubbing down the sorrel once she'd unsaddled him, then turned him into his stall with his usual measure of grain and fresh water. A smile touched her lips as she walked toward the house and saw Clay's pickup parked beside her car. Though she hadn't expected him to stop over so early, she was glad to see him anytime and her relaxed stride quickened as she came up the walk to the back porch door and stepped into the kitchen to head for the living room.

Surprised to find no one there, Willa was just about to call out, when she heard voices coming from the den. A sense of foreboding wrapped coldly around her heart as she approached the open door.

"Good. You're finally here." Paige's odd greeting directed attention to Willa

as she hesitated in the doorway. Aunt Tess glanced toward Willa from where she sat in one of the wing chairs. A shadow of worry came into Willa's eyes as she saw clearly the strain on her aunt's face.

She walked farther into the room as Clay sat down on the edge of the desk, his long legs stretched out in front of him. Willa didn't need to see his stern expression to know that something was very wrong, or the almost fearful look of nervous agitation on her cousin's face that warned her Paige was up to something.

Paige cleared her throat nervously, then took a quick breath before she glanced first toward Willa, then toward her mother. "As we all know, Willa's been keeping the books and has had control of the Circle H bank accounts since she's been here."

Willa's frown deepened in irritation, but Paige hurried on. "I've been trying for days to get her to explain things for me, but she's always got some excuse or other, so I decided to have a look for myself. As you can see, Clay—" Paige came around the desk and passed him the ledger—"there are three checks written out for several hundred dollars toward the back—checks we probably wouldn't have found out about right away," she hastened to add. "And each one is made out to Willa."

The soft sound of dismay that came from Tess penetrated Willa's shock and she glanced worriedly toward her aunt. Tess's eyes were riveted on Paige.

"I couldn't believe it myself," Paige said, "until I saw the bank statement Willa got today from the personal account she'd opened in town."

"Oh, Paige, no. You didn't go through Willa's mail!" Tess's exclamation went ignored as Paige grabbed for the envelope addressed to Willa and

withdrew the statement. By this time Clay had tossed the ledger onto the desk and come to his feet.

Paige thrust three deposit slips into his hand. "As you can see, Clay, the figures on the deposit slips match the amounts written out of the Circle H accounts to Willa. Everything is in her handwriting, both the checks she made out to herself and endorsed, and the deposit slips."

Willa was so stunned by Paige's accusation and the obvious trouble she'd gone to to concoct such an outlandish scheme that she was speechless. Her mind raced to figure out just how Paige had managed to arrange everything to make her look like a thief. Then she realized that Paige could have easily got hold of her checkbook, forged her signature on the ranch checks, then used Willa's deposit slips to deposit the money into her account. After all that, it would have been easier still to watch the mail for Willa's bank statement and arrange a confrontation. That Paige had grown desperate enough to do such a thing shocked her.

"I think you need to say something, Willa," Clay said.

Willa was snared a moment by the utter seriousness in his dark eyes, the deadly quiet about him. Did he believe she was capable of stealing from her aunt?

Willa started to shake her head in vehement denial, when Tess's watery gray eyes came up to meet hers. The pleading look of misery on her aunt's face stopped Willa from the outraged protestation of innocence she'd been about to make. As Tess's face began to crumple, it came home to Willa in an instant just how much more traumatic it would be for her aunt if she insisted that Paige had engineered all this, rather than accept the blame herself. *"She's the best thing Cal and I ever*

*accomplished together,"* Willa recalled her aunt's words.

"Willa?" Clay's stern voice prompted. "You aren't a thief, Willa, and you're no liar, either."

Willa's lips parted in surprise at the utter certainty in his dark eyes, then came together again as she glanced worriedly toward her aunt. She started to speak, to defend herself with the truth—even to the extent of telling them all about the accident—but Tess bowed her head in shame and clenched a small shaky fist to her pale lips, effectively squelching any thought Willa might have had of telling the truth. Suddenly overwhelmed with fear for her aunt, she managed only with the utmost self-control not to run to Tess to try to hug away her distress.

Tears stung Willa's eyes as she made the only decision she felt she could make. Her voice was a choked rasp as she said, "I'm sorry, Aunt Tess. I—I'll stop in town and see that the money is transferred from my account back into yours."

Tess seemed to wilt even more at that, but Paige's arms came around her, muffling her mother's soft cry against her shoulder. Willa didn't chance a look at Clay. The fury she sensed emanating from him was enough. Unable to control the tears of despair and impotence she felt, Willa rushed from the room, taking the stairs to her own room two at a time.

\*

WILLA PICKED over the breakfast of steak, eggs and blueberry muffins the cook had set in front of her ten minutes before, but she had no more appetite for this meal than she'd had for the others Ruth Miller had prepared this past week. As always, her thoughts were miles away as worry and anguish

continued to knot her insides. Finally, for Ruth's sake and because she planned to put in another hard day at the D & R, Willa managed to clear her plate, forgoing a second cup of coffee as she pushed away from the table.

"ALL RIGHT, Hardcase, let's try it again," Willa murmured with a grim smile as she picked herself up from the hard-packed dirt and reached again for the reins and a hank of Jack-in-the-Box's black mane. The colt had been almost as fractious this morning as the day before, and Willa mounted cautiously.

"It's about time you learned which one of us is more stubborn," she crooned softly as her grip tightened on the reins and she prepared for the bunching of muscles that would signal another fit of bucking.

Instead the colt moved easily forward, seeming to accept her weight as he pranced around the outer edge of the steel-railed corral. Willa was not fooled. As was the colt's habit, just when she thought he was cooperating he seemed to enjoy leaping into the air.

The next half hour went smoothly. Willa was pleased the colt was already beginning to take signals from the reins and the guiding pressure of her legs.

But the moment she started for the barn and the colt wasn't claiming her close concentration, the melancholy she'd managed to escape for a couple of hours settled over her once more. She might never see Clay again, or her aunt, and the very thought dragged her heart down as she was reminded again of how much she'd felt compelled to give up in order to protect Tess's frail health.

"You're damned good with a horse, Willa." And Clay Cantrell stepped out of the shadows just inside the barn.

"It's too bad you aren't as good with people."

Willa's heart lurched sickly at his harsh tone. "H-how did you find me?" she asked in a near whisper.

"Your license plates were from Elbert County, and I've been over at least half of it asking for you." Clay's face revealed nothing but sternness.

"Did Paige and Aunt Tess decide to press charges?" she managed to get out.

"No charges," he answered gruffly.

"Then why are you here?"

"I'm after my own pound of flesh."

Willa paled at that.

"But you'd better get that colt put up first." Clay stepped aside and Willa numbly led the horse past him.

That Clay was very, very angry was no secret, but what he was doing in Colorado was. In those tense moments that she quickly stripped the colt of the saddle and turned him into the nearest stall, Willa tried to guess what he'd meant about his pound of flesh. Finished, she turned toward him.

The instant she was facing him, she found herself caught in a steely embrace as his lips came down on hers with nerve-shattering force. For the next moments, their world diminished until there was only the two of them. Everything else flew from Willa's mind and her head spun as joy rocketed through her. He was here; this was real and right. He was hers and this kiss was the seal, the brand that seared them both.

Clay tore his lips from hers and held her even tighter as he pressed his lean jaw against her hair and mumbled raggedly, "How could you do it, Willa? How could you just run away and not give me a chance?" Clay released her then and stared down at her bleakly. "Did you think I'd be fool

enough to believe that damned crock that Paige cooked up?"

Willi couldn't speak, but the hurt was vivid in the deep emerald of her eyes as she recalled the other time he'd believed Paige's story over hers.

Clay cursed softly and his grip tightened. "I wasn't out of my mind with shock and rage over a senseless death this time. If I hadn't been so crazy with grief over Angie I would have seen through Paige's lies five years ago." Clay's voice lowered to a choked gruffness. "I probably knew it on some level all along; but when I saw how Paige was setting you up this time, suddenly it all became clear."

Clay crushed her to him. "My God, what we've made you go through, sweetheart. There aren't words enough to tell you how sorry I am."

Willi could hear the tears in his voice, and felt a flood of her own cascade down her face as she pressed her cheek against his chest.

Over and over Clay repeated, "I'm so sorry, baby, so sorry."

Clay was shaking as badly as she was when he drew away to lift her chin with the side of his finger. The lips he pressed to hers were infinitely tender.

"I should have believed you back then, Willi. I should have and I didn't." His face was full of regret. "I can't give you back those years and I can't take away all the pain you must have felt, but I'm hoping one day you'll be able to forgive me."

Willi had a hard time finding her voice, but when she did there was no hesitation over the words. "I already forgive you."

Clay kissed her again, then hugged her tightly, and Willi reveled in the love and security she felt in his arms.

"What about that pound of flesh you said you came for?" she asked,

and heard the catch in Clay's chest as he gave her a squeeze.

"I wanted that because you didn't try to get everything about the accident straightened out with me when you first came back to Cascade, and because you let Paige get away with her lies a second time. The truth is, though, it's you who deserves to get your pound of flesh—from both me and Paige."

"What's happened to Paige?" Willi asked. "Is Aunt Tess all right?"

"Tess's fine. Worried about you, but fine. She'd already guessed about the accident some time ago, but kept hoping she was wrong because she couldn't quite face the idea that Paige could have lied about it. She went through a rough patch for a day or so after you left, but she's dealing with it well enough. I don't suppose, though, that she'll start feeling better until she knows for sure you're all right."

Willi was relieved at that news. "And Paige?"

Clay's face went a little rigid. "After you left the den, I told her flat out I knew she was lying and that I knew she'd lied when Angie died. She finally broke down and admitted everything. Afterward, Tess made it clear that she still loved Paige and that the door was always open, but that until Paige made things up with you, their relationship was going to be strained. Tess more or less insisted that Paige see a psychiatrist, and I hear Paige left for New York on Thursday."

Willi was quiet a moment as she tried to absorb it all. "How do you feel about that?" she asked gently.

"How do I feel?" Clay released a deep breath, weariness flashing over his face. "I'm not sure I can forgive Paige for either Angie's death or the lies about you—but I need so much

forgiveness myself that I don't have a leg to stand on."

Willie saw clearly the uncertainty in Clay's eyes as he said the words, the silent plea for reassurance that made him seem oddly vulnerable. Her heart ached.

"I love you; Clay," she said with simple earnestness. "I said I've forgiven you and I mean it. I'm sick of letting the past hurt us."

"Then...do you think there's a chance you'll ever agree to come back to Cascade and marry me?"

Willie searched Clay's face for an indication that his proposal of marriage was in any way a kind of penance, but instead she saw the love and longing in his eyes that mirrored her own.

Clay appeared a bit nervous at her hesitation. "You could keep your partnership in the D & R, if you want. I'm not opposed, although I'm going to miss you like hell every time you come south to check on business."

A soft smile touched her lips. "Thank you for not expecting me to sell out. This ranch and my partnership with Ivy was all I had for a long time."

"Well? Are you going to say yes and put me out of my misery?" he prompted gruffly. Then his lips came down lightly on hers.

Willie just managed to get out a breathless yes before Clay's mouth fused hotly to hers, securing forever the bond between them that nothing would ever break again.



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# STAR SIGNS—JULY & AUGUST

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## **LIBRA September 23–October 22**

This is a month of meeting new people and socializing with old friends. Luckily you realized in time that you've been neglecting them lately, because when that happens they may start socializing elsewhere! Be wary of first impressions midmonth, when someone who comes across as very overbearing, is just the opposite.



## **SCORPIO October 23–November 22**

Someone close to you is very upsetting early on in the month, and although it will be difficult, try to ignore most of the comments they throw at you. Careerwise, this is a brilliant month, and at work you can do no wrong even if you feel that someone is standing in your way on the ladder of success. With patience you'll be able to overcome this.



## **SAGITTARIUS November 23–December 22**

Financial ups and downs are high on your list of priorities now, and the pressure will get greater before it eases off! Just hang in there! This will lead to a relaxing end to the month and you'll find yourself enjoying a quiet time with friends and relations.



## **CAPRICORN December 23–January 22**

A close friend or loved one surprises you midmonth when you both seem to be in harmony with each other without having to try as hard as usual. Things are certainly looking up! Make the most of this easygoing time and get out and about, spend some time together while you both have the time, without feeling hassled.



## **AQUARIUS January 23–February 22**

A cheerful and optimistic month is ahead of you now and your enthusiasm rubs off on all those around you. The center of attention is what you are now and loving every minute of it! A small crisis toward the end of the month throws you slightly but you are more than able to overcome this.



## **PISCES February 23–March 22**

Persuasion is needed this month to keep the peace among loved ones. Tempers are apt to run high and it falls on you to try to keep everything under control. You also seem to have a lot of things going on this month, and at times you may wonder if you can juggle everything to fit into such a tight schedule.

*STAR SIGNS (continued)*



### **ARIES March 23–April 22**

Recent events leave a lot to be desired and you may feel that you have all the worries of the world on your shoulders. But suitable action can clear the air and you'll be able to overcome any situation you may find yourself in. The month ends on an upbeat mood and you find yourself in a happy atmosphere.



### **TAURUS April 23–May 22**

This is a month when you feel like getting away from the humdrum of life and having a quiet time on your own for a change. Well, you can, but first you must clear up all those nagging little jobs that have been on your conscience lately; then you'll be free to do whatever you like!



### **GEMINI May 23–June 21**

You are obsessed with helping others at the moment, and this seems to be taking up a great deal of your time. Any problems you encounter are of your own making, and it's up to you to make sure they are sorted out. All in all, it's not going to be an easy month, but you'll feel a great sense of achievement at the end of it!



### **CANCER June 22–July 22**

A busy month is in store for you, but it couldn't have come at a better time. You've never been in a better position than now to take on responsibilities, and you feel more than capable of sorting them out. Conflicting situations take you by surprise on the 25th but they clear the air and you end the month on a high!



### **LEO July 23–August 22**

A relative comes to you in confidence for help at the start of the month, but tread softly because they may be feeling very fragile and vulnerable. This is your chance to prove that you can listen as well as give out advice.



### **VIRGO August 23–September 22**

Events this month could lead to a completely new change in career. And don't be put off by people who try and steer you along the same old route you've always taken. Be prepared to take a risk for a change—and you may find life becomes quite exciting!



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45. More harsh
47. Intermission
50. Drive back
51. Financier John Jacob \_\_\_\_\_
52. Greet
54. Plumed bird
57. Man

60. Benefactor

62. Spoken

64. Ajar

65. Levels

66. Anger

67. Unites

68. Dry

69. Mesh

8. Entrances

9. Anger

10. Performed

11. Mr. Vigoda

13. Begin again

14. Classifies

20. Epoch

22. Hardy heroine

24. Storekeeper

26. Wigwags

27. Long-billed birds

28. More daring

29. Salad green

30. Isolated ones

31. Fill

32. Sheep

34. Strike sharply

37. Author King et al.

39. Wobbles

42. Space

46. Skips over

48. Geared wheel

49. Mistake

51. Actor Ed \_\_\_\_\_

53. Strong emotion

55. \_\_\_\_\_ go brag!

56. Story

57. Cut grass

58. Mimic

59. Conducted

61. Individual

63. Permit

## DOWN

1. Sullivan et al.

2. Close tightly

3. Epic

4. NCO

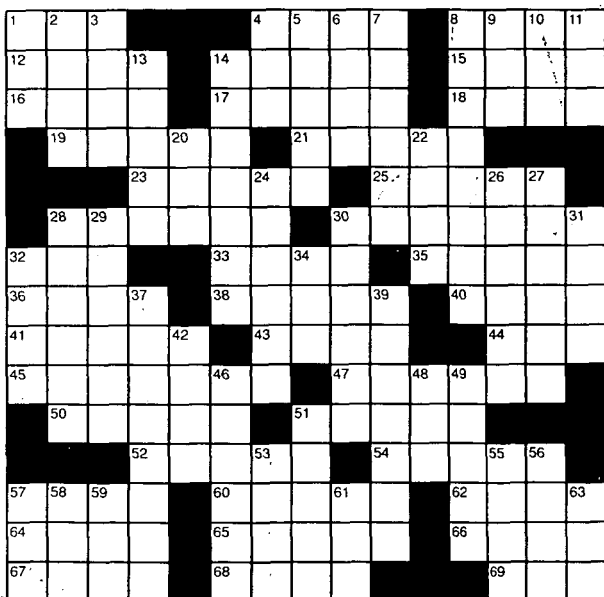
5. Obliterate

6. Camper's

lodging

7. Calm

**Solution on page 55 of this issue.**



# HARLEQUIN® WORLD'S BEST

## Romances

### DIANA PALMER—Rawhide and Lace

Because of Ty Wade, Erin had been crippled in a car crash. She'd lost the baby he'd given her, and her modeling career in the process. He knew she could never forgive him. So when she agreed to return to Texas to help save Staghorn Ranch, he vowed to make her well again...well enough to walk away from him?

### ARLENE JAMES—The Right Moves

Angie Faulkner had sunk every penny into Strawberry, her prizewinning roan. Their life was the rodeo circuit...and she'd convince that ornery cowboy, Rafferty Sharpstone, she'd fit in with his crazy ropers. But after falling in love with that long-legged hunk, could she convince him that a woman—Angie especially—wasn't a threat to a man trying a comeback on the rodeo circuit?

### REBECCA FLANDERS—Painted Sunsets

Cassie Grant wanted to get back to her roots at the Circle P Ranch. But when her brother left her in charge of the roundup, Cassie faced an adventure more challenging than any she'd dared imagine! First the cook quit, and then the tallyman was suspiciously injured. These incidents she could handle, but the ruggedly handsome Logan gave her trouble—for when she looked into the elusive cowboy's eyes, she saw herself falling in love.

### SUSAN FOX—The Black Sheep

Willa Ross wasn't welcome in her hometown—especially not by Clay Cantrell, who still held her responsible for his sister's death. But when her aunt took ill, and desperately needed her to look after the failing family ranch, Willa couldn't say no. Willa's presence stirred up painful memories for Clay. So she'd vowed to keep out of his way. Yet they were drawn to each other—this time not as love-struck teenagers, but as man and woman.